



Strategy Notebook 230-B
India: keys to its rise to global power

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INTRODUCTION

India, the undefinable power

Javier Gil Pérez

I would like to begin the introduction to this Strategy Paper, entitled *India: keys to its rise to global power* with the wise definition of India that my good friend Ana Ballesteros Peiró, author of one of the chapters of this joint publication, gave some time ago.

Her years in India undoubtedly marked her personal and professional development, but, above all, they made her a participant in the immense diversity and complexity that the Republic of India harbours, and which explains the difficulty in defining, explaining and understanding this marvellous country. A country that is destined to play a major role on the international stage in this and the next century.

What is India? Where is this young republic heading? What are the obstacles that encumber the complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages and religions that make up and shape India? How are its foreign relations within its immediate environment? What is its role within the greater new Indo-Pacific area? How does India interpret the complex international order that is undergoing a complete transformation? What role does India seek to play in the new global architecture?

All of these, and many more, are questions to which readers will find detailed answers in the following pages, comprising six chapters of this strategy notebook that I have had the honour of directing and leading. And which would have not been possible without the good work, constant collaboration and unrelenting enthusiasm of the authors.

For this reason, the first thing I would like to say in this Introduction is a big thank you to all those who have made this Strategy Notebook possible. The main goal of this text has been to bring one of the biggest candidates for global geopolitical leadership in the future closer to the Spanish general public.

Infinite thanks to all members of the Strategy Notebook for willingly accepting my comments, for meeting the stipulated deadlines and, above all, for creating a magnificent piece of work. After reading this Strategy Notebook in its entirety, readers will be able to glimpse some of the main internal and external vectors that make this indefinable country, India, a nation that is slowly but inexorably becoming a new global geopolitical actor.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies for having entrusted me with such a huge task and mission. Their continued support has been one of the keys to the creation of this Strategy Notebook. I would like to place on record my deepest and most sincere thanks.

And therein lies, among other variables, one of the main reasons why this informative work is necessary and, I would go so far as to say, essential, to pay due attention to an actor that has undoubtedly boosted its international presence in the last two decades.

I would therefore like to outline here the five main reasons why this Strategy Notebook, entitled *India: keys to its rise to global power*, is central to the research landscape in Spain, both on India and, by extension, the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Firstly, India today presents population and size figures that make it necessary to pay special attention to this beautiful and complex country. Its more than 1.45 billion inhabitants and three million km² are simply colossal. And this means that this country represents approximately 18% of the world's population and that if its demographic growth does not slow down substantially in the coming years, it will reach the astronomical figure of two billion people in this century. These figures imply great challenges for

the Indian government as well as the international community now and in the near future, since significant increases are expected in the consumption of water, energy, food, mineral, energy resources and an endless carousel of all sorts of other products. This is key to highlighting the first message about India, which is that whatever happens there will have regional and global repercussions.

Secondly, in India, while there is still a large and persistently poor and marginalised population, the fact is that for decades it has enjoyed significant economic growth that has transformed its own economic structure and established a large and vibrant new middle class. This middle class has made India an important destination for foreign investment, thanks to economic development, as well as a new centre of innovation and development, located above all in the city of Bangalore and symbolised by India's ability to develop its own vaccine during the Covid pandemic. The country has become the world's fifth largest economy in its own right and is expected to become the third largest in the coming years, surpassing Japan and Germany, and where its companies are beginning to enjoy an important position in foreign markets. All of this makes India one of the new global economic engines.

Thirdly, India's growing presence beyond its South Asian regional sphere positions it as a new global actor. India's increasing investments in Africa and Latin America, its deepening security relations with Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, and its one-to-one relations with major powers such as the United States, Russia and China make India not only a relevant actor on the international stage, but also an extremely special and complex one in the eyes of the West, owing to its ability to maintain stable relations to date, albeit with varying degrees of proximity with countries that are at odds in the current turbulent international scene. The most relevant power triangle here is perfectly symbolised by India's relations with the US while, at the same time, it enjoys a privileged relationship with Russia, with which it has a shared defence industry, as well as Iran, both of which are civilisational countries. These complex and difficult relationships merely demonstrate one of the clearest characteristics that make India an undefinable power. That is, its capacity and flexibility in its foreign policy, which is based on the preservation of its values and the staunch defence of its interests. Flexibility that is also manifested in India's membership of multiple regional or thematic organisations, ranging from the BRICS to the Shanghai

Cooperation Organisation to the 2U2 Group, which includes the US, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and India.

Fourthly, its new global ambition lies not only in its intense external projection, but also in the key role it plays and will enjoy, in the near future, in some of the hottest international issues. India's constant demands for a new reform of the international order go far beyond rhetoric and take the form of clear commitments such as its desire to lead the so-called Global South, the reform of the United Nations Permanent Security Council, where India claims a permanent seat, and the reform of a large part of the arms control treaties, including those on weapons of mass destruction. India is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and it is also not a signatory to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. These are treaties and thematic areas which need not only the agreement of the old powers, but also of emerging ones, among which India claims a primordial role. Additionally, the development of the cyber and space domains makes India a necessary actor for their regulation, not only today but also, and above all, in the future. India is developing cyber and space capabilities at both civilian and military levels and is one of the few countries with military anti-satellite capabilities, making India's participation necessary, not only in the new geopolitics of today, but also in shaping future space and cyber geopolitics. Finally, new security threats, symbolised by climate change, pandemics, global pollution, etc., make India an actor whose participation should be mandatory for their mitigation. In other words, India is an active player in the resolution of global issues.

Fifthly, India and South Asia's own geopolitical positions make it a perfect object of analysis. It is located at a crossroads between South Asia and Southeast Asia, with the always unstable Myanmar and its Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, next to the Strait of Malacca, a window to China from the north of the country, a gateway to Central Asia due to its proximity to Afghanistan, only interrupted by its archenemy Pakistan and, finally, with a large sea front from which it looks out, curiously, to the Indian Ocean and other areas of special interest, such as the whole of the east coast of Africa or the sea lanes leading to the Middle East and its rich energy resources.

And all of this, as the author of this introduction points out, undoubtedly defines the South Asian region as one of the most unstable in the world, both because of the prevailing nuclear proliferation and the episodes of war that have taken place. The

four wars between India and Pakistan, Bangladesh's independence after seceding from Pakistan in 1971, the war between India and China in 1962 and the continuous skirmishes between the two, fanned by the embers of strategic competition for regional leadership, terrorist violence within India itself—but also in neighbouring and unstable Pakistan—, the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan as power brokers, or the growing instability in Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, make the region not only an interesting object of study, but also a must for all who are interested in the future of the world. Understanding India's strategic vision and its relationship with its neighbouring countries is, to put it simply, key.

These five imperatives, which may be summed up as maintaining its independence and internal stability, pursuing economic development and becoming a global actor with real power, have guided the authors throughout their accurate analysis.

Thus, in the first chapter, which focuses on the country's internal challenges, Rubén Campos Palarea provides an excellent overview of the main internal challenges faced by India. A key chapter in the evolution of this strategy notebook, Rubén provides a magnificent analysis of India's internal situation, in order to subsequently build a full thorough framework of its regional and global projection.

Challenges range from the capacity to offer not only a decent future to a growing population, but also, above all, a present where Indian citizens can enjoy economic well-being. Additionally, its enormous ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity are aspects wisely analysed by the author. Nor does it forget the role of the castes—an anachronistic vestige that still persists in Indian reality— or the weak situation of women's rights, all within an Indian political system that, although it is advancing, is affected by a growing polarisation that ranges from the ideological to the strictly identitarian and regional.

The second chapter, which focuses on India's external projection, analyses India's relations with various global giants and is entitled *Pares inter pares? India in the great power divide*. Its author, Javier Fernández Aparicio, provides a superb explanation of the changes that have taken place since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, to his foreign policy in the search for and achievement of what is known as strategic autonomy. To this end, he focuses his analysis on India's relations with three great powers

located in disparate strategic environments: the United States, Russia and the People's Republic of China, and where the interests of all of them converge or are diametrically opposed. Thus, the author pays particular attention to diverse dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, focusing especially on maritime projection, economic and security relations, the role of technology, and areas of cooperation but also confrontation. It is a necessary chapter, therefore, to understand India's capacity for adaptation and balance in its foreign policy and its self perception on the international stage.

In the third chapter entitled *Relaunching the India-Europe relationship: key players and sectors in the Modi era*, Amaia Sánchez Cacicedo provides a perfect analysis of relations between India and the European continent. Both geopolitical actors —seeking and needing each other in the new reconfiguration of world power with China's rise— have found important avenues of cooperation in key areas for the future such as the Indian Ocean itself, trade relations where there is much untapped potential and technology —focusing above all on the green and digital transition and the whole new range of critical technologies—. Areas, as the author masterfully explains, where Spain possesses an important know-how that facilitates the improvement of bilateral relations between the two nations. All this without forgetting the important logistical role in India's global projection in the new trade routes where Europe will play a key role.

In the fourth chapter, Mario López Areu, in his excellent analysis entitled *The neighbourhood policy in South Asia: A weak flank of India's foreign policy*, dissects, with astonishing first-hand knowledge, India's foreign relations with its neighbours in its closest regional environment. The author analyses how India has tried to maintain its role as a hegemonic power, both vis-à-vis Pakistan and China in the regional environment, with mixed results for its interests. This aspect, as the author concludes, is one of the weakest points in its external projection.

In the fifth chapter, Ana Ballesteros Peiró, in her analysis *India and its western Muslim neighbourhood*, conducts a refined and brilliant analysis and diagnosis of India's relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab countries of the Gulf. In this analysis, the impact of Hindu nationalist ideology —known as *Hindutva*— on bilateral relations with these countries is assessed, alongside other crucial variables such as trade, energy, security and politics. This analysis perfectly demonstrates the flexibility

and adaptability that India has been able to implement in the face of the Muslim world in its immediate geopolitical environment, a feature that hides one of India's great strengths in its global rise.

Finally, Andrea Arrieta Ruiz closes this Strategy Notebook with her sublime analysis entitled *India beyond the Indo-Pacific: from the Global South to the Arctic*. This chapter looks at India's external projection beyond its natural borders, through a profound reconfiguration of its external action. By means of a beautiful and precise narrative, the author shows how India has expanded its influence beyond the Indo-Pacific, establishing strategic alliances in Africa with Nigeria and South Africa; in Latin America with Argentina, Mexico and Brazil; in the Middle East with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates; in Southeast Asia and in new geopolitical areas of interest such as the Arctic. The author presents India's external projection as the key element in its transition from a regional power to a global actor, not only redefining the boundaries of its influence on the international stage, but also, and above all, presenting itself as a truly global actor.

For all of the above reasons, I hope, dear readers, that you will find this Strategy Notebook intellectually stimulating, and that it provides you with a solid understanding of India, a country that in the coming years will continue its particular rise in the new world order in the making.

Madrid, 8 March 2025.

CHAPTER ONE

Domestic challenges

Rubén Campos Palarea

Abstract

This chapter shall focus on providing a structural overview of India's domestic challenges with a view to cementing its role as an increasingly important international actor on the global stage. To this end, its demographic and economic situation shall be presented, with its challenges and opportunities, its major advances and also its negative aspects. In this context, the social situation in the country shall be analysed, highlighting, along with the progress made in recent decades, the persisting significant inequalities, including from the perspective of women's rights and the society of castes. Finally, how the world's biggest democracy faces challenges such as polarisation, regional diversity and the coexistence of different identities shall be reviewed.

Keywords

India, Modi, BJP, Congress Party, Demographics, Economics, Gender, Inequality, Caste system, Democracy, Polarisation, Diversity.

1 Introduction

This chapter shall focus on providing a structural overview of India's domestic capabilities and challenges in cementing its role as an increasingly important international actor at the global level. One of the books that has best defined India's new role is *The New World Disorder and The Indian Imperative*. Its authors are Shashi Tharoor —politician and analyst— and Samir Saran —president of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India's most influential think tank on international relations—. In the book, two of India's most influential thinkers in the international field join forces to share an Indian vision of the crisis of the post-World War II liberal international order, which they characterise as "the new world disorder" (Tharoor and Saran, 2020).

These two authors consider that India has a fundamental role to play because of its growing influence at the geopolitical level, which could give it a leading role in major global discussions on security, climate change and the governance of the new digital scenario. All of this is based on the fundamental capabilities and resources that India has built up following its independence from the British Empire in the mid-20th century. Two of the key aspects of this new India are its sustained commitment to constitutional democracy and its identity as a non-hegemonic global power. The *Indian imperative* of which they speak in their recent book is a vindication of this new Asian global actor and its diplomacy, underpinned by its soft power. Tharoor and Saran highlight, however, the challenges India faces in achieving this global power status. These domestic challenges shall be the focus of this chapter.

India is going through a time of great transformation and its leaders —not only political but also social, business, academic and intellectual leaders such as Tharoor and Saran— have their own scenarios for its role as an increasingly influential actor in the international arena, while at the same time it has to face key domestic challenges such as demographic evolution, inequality and democratic governance.

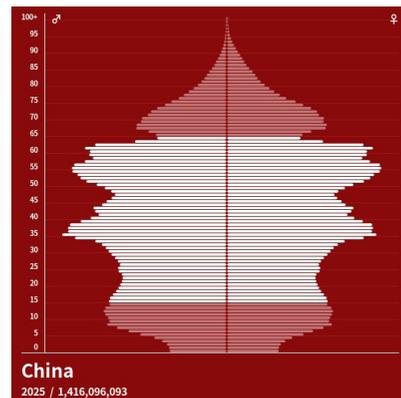
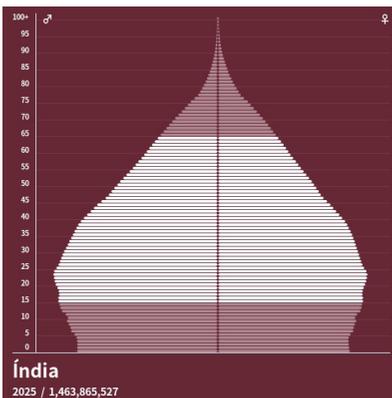
To better understand these dynamics, the demographic and economic situation shall be presented, the social implications analysed, including the unequal situation of Indian women and groups disadvantaged by the social organisation of castes, and it shall be explained how the world's largest democracy faces challenges such as polarisation, regional diversity and the coexistence of different identities.

2 Demographics

India's population has increased almost fourfold since its birth as a modern State in 1947, making it a major demographic power. According to recent UN estimates, India has overtaken China as the world's most populous country, surpassing 1.4 billion people (UNDESA, 2022). This is a huge leap from the 361 million it had according to the 1951 national census.

Although this datum has generated media interest and is usually included in recent information or analyses of the Asian country (El País, 2023), what is significant is not necessarily the number of inhabitants but the model of its growth and the positive demographic dividend of its population pyramid, with a still mostly young population. This element is key to the short-term promise of continued economic growth, but it is not static. Key political actors in the country are concerned about its possible future evolution, as the birth and death rates are both declining (UNDESA, 2022), which implies longer life expectancy and lower fertility rates and a possible change in the following decades of this population pyramid.

If this trend continues in the future, India shall face the challenge of the ageing of a significant proportion of its citizens, as the percentage of people over sixty years of age shall increase over the next twenty years. A population pyramid marked by a greater presence of retired people is an aspect that represents a fundamental economic challenge and that, at the present time, is weighing down China's economic growth expectations (Esteban, 2024). Therefore, according to the aforementioned Indian politician and analyst Shashi Tharoor, his country has "a narrow window of opportunity to harness the growth of its productive workforce to drive economic development" (Tharoor, 2022).



When comparing Indian and Chinese populations, it should be noted not only how their different population pyramids affect them, but also that China has a territory of approximately 9.6 million square kilometres, while India has only a third of the same space at 3.3 million square kilometres. Thus, India's population density is almost three times that of China. India with much less territory and resources must care for, educate, feed and provide work for a similar amount of people.

India's demographic boom in the second half of the 20th century coincided with an economic transformation that brought significant improvements in life expectancy, development levels and food production. Population growth and how to provide educational or health resources, as well as employment, has preoccupied the authorities, as indicated by measures reflected in a study by the Pew Research Center in the United States (2021): some states and territories discourage large families by imposing penalties, such as banning parents with more than two children from receiving social services or holding political office.

“In 2017, India's Ministry of Health and Welfare launched a comprehensive family planning programme with the goal of reducing fertility to replacement levels by 2025 by improving health care facilities, access to contraceptives, and reproductive health education, particularly in areas with relatively high fertility rates” (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Another demographic challenge is regional inequality patterns. The northern states of India are still in the process of population growth, while in the south the increase in population has already stabilised. Even in some southern states such as Kerala the population is shrinking. The northern states, which are poorer, less educated and largely speak Hindi, the national language of the Devanagari language family, account for a significant part of the increase, while the southern states, which have a different cultural identity, speaking for example languages of the Dravidian family very different from those of their northern neighbours, have limited population expansion more effectively, due to better human development and educational policies (Tharoor, 2022). In general, the southern states of India (such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) not only have slower population growth but are also more developed economically and in terms of social indicators than many northern states (such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh).

Another challenge related to demographics and regional diversity has to do with the democratic dimension. The greater demographic weight of the northern states described above should have given them, by proportional numbers of citizens, greater parliamentary representation at the federal level. However, concerned about regional imbalances, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the Indian National Congress promoted a legislative reform in 1976 to freeze the effects of the census on the distribution of seats. Twenty-five years later, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of India's other major political party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), renewed this for another twenty-five years so that parliamentary distribution has continued to fail to include the larger population increase in the northern states.

The current government of Narendra Modi, also of the BJP, shall have to make a decision on whether to continue with this anomalous situation in 2026, half a century after Indira Gandhi's reform, or to restructure the distribution of seats according to the current population. A decision to reconfigure the distribution of seats based on the current census would give greater power to the north of the country vis-à-vis the south, in a key decision regarding domestic power balances. For Tharoor (2022), while this scenario would "make the Indian parliament more representative", it would also give the northern states a two-thirds majority in the parliament or Lokh Sabha, allowing them—in conjunction with the support of whoever gets these votes—to amend the Constitution at shall without necessarily contemplating the wishes of the southern states' representatives.

3 Economics

Over the last decade under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinets, India has experienced continued economic growth, in line with that it has enjoyed since the beginning of the 21st century and on which it has built its aspirations to become a global player, while also facing significant challenges.

The Bharatiya Janata Party government has implemented important economic reforms such as demonetisation in 2016, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 and various initiatives focused on digitalisation and strengthening infrastructure, including access to electricity, drinking water and sanitation (Pérez López, 2020). The objective of Modi's economic policy has been to simplify the tax system, reduce corruption and increase the formalisation of

the economy, in addition to improving the business environment. Initiatives such as *Make in India* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (producing in India or self-reliant India) have more or less effectively sought to strengthen self-sufficiency and the national industrial sector.

Progress in recent years has been significant and has been reflected in India's improvement, for example, in the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business* index, which measures the capacity of States to promote and facilitate business activity in their territory (from 142nd to 63rd place in just five years) and in attracting foreign direct investment, which has been gradually and steadily increasing since 2014 (Pérez López, 2020). A particularly significant fact is that, during Narendra Modi's governments between 2014 and 2022, the GDP *per capita* has increased from five thousand to seven thousand dollars, an increase of 40% in just eight years. According to the International Monetary Fund, India's economy is projected to have a growth rate of 6.5% in 2024. This is higher than China's projected growth of 4.6% and exceeds that of any other major economy in the world (Sen, 2024).

These excellent macroeconomic data do not prevent the Indian economy from also facing difficulties in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact, with GDP declining by around 7.3% in 2020. Recovery has been rapid with a growth of about 6.4% in 2023 and a projected 6.5% in 2024, but millions of informal workers were severely affected. Along these lines, the Modi government's agricultural and labour reforms have been controversial and have generated significant protests, especially among farmers. These laws allowed farmers to sell their produce outside government-regulated markets, facilitated direct deals between producers and companies, and reduced the role of intermediaries. However, farmers, especially in the Punjab and Haryana regions, protested massively, claiming that the reforms would benefit large corporations and jeopardise the minimum purchase prices previously guaranteed by the government. After a year of protests and blockades in New Delhi, Modi announced in November 2021 the repeal of the laws, marking one of his government's biggest concessions to popular pressure (Narula, 2022).

While successive Modi governments have succeeded in expanding India's economy, they have not been equally successful in generating productive employment for the large number of unskilled workers. Approximately 40% of the labour force still

works in agriculture, while only 20% work in industry or business services, such as the technology sector. Despite multiple initiatives to boost jobs in the industrial sector, such as the Make in India Programme since 2014 and the recent production incentive scheme of 2023, the share of industry in the economy has not grown significantly (Sen, 2024).

For India to achieve a labour-intensive industrialisation like China, a deep structural reforms in product, labour and credit markets are required. However, these changes are politically complex, as they involve confronting the interests of the country's powerful business conglomerates and trade unions. The Modi government's third consecutive term in office shall have as one of its biggest challenges the creation of productive jobs outside the agricultural sector for increasingly educated and ambitious young people.

Aware of the difficulties of providing quality employment to a large part of the population, the Modi government, especially in its second term, has implemented public policies aimed at providing economic and material resources to the underprivileged population in a policy referred to by some experts as *new welfarism* (Anand *et al.*, 2020).

The Narendra Modi government's new welfarism represents an opposite approach to what its centre-left political alternative, the Congress Party, has implemented for decades in terms of redistributive and inclusive public policies. It does not prioritise the provision of public goods such as basic health or primary education or the strengthening of the public safety net that previous Indian Congress Party governments have promoted with mixed success. Its bid is to make it easier for the government, heavily supported by technological and digital tools, to deliver directly to the most disadvantaged groups essential goods and services normally provided by the private sector, such as bank accounts, gas for cooking, toilets and sinks, electricity, housing and, more recently, water and also cash (Anand *et al.*, 2020).

A paradigmatic example of this policy has been the implementation of the Aadhaar programme, launched in 2009 during the Congress Party government prior to Narendra Modi. Aadhaar is a biometric identification system that assigns a unique twelve-digit number to every resident in India, based on data such as fingerprints and iris scans. Aadhaar is a cornerstone in India's digital governance strategy, reflecting the Modi government's approach to a *new welfareism* that combines technology and social policies for inclusion and development.

Interestingly, the programme originally faced a lot of criticism, including from the then-candidate Narendra Modi, who in 2014 called it a “political gimmick” (The Wire, 2024). Despite this, the Modi government adopted and significantly expanded the programme after winning the elections that same year and assuming power. In 2016, the Modi administration enacted the Aadhaar Act, consolidating the use of the initiative in various government initiatives. Today 99% of Indians of legal age are included in the programme (Sen, 2024).

Under Modi’s leadership, Aadhaar has been integrated into multiple schemes to improve the efficiency of public redistribution policies and reduce fraud. For example, it has been used in the *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana* campaign to facilitate financial inclusion, enabling millions of bank accounts to be opened for individuals who previously lacked a bank account. In 2024, 71.1% of Indians had an account in a financial institution compared to 48.3% who had one ten years earlier, when Modi began his first term (Sen, 2024).

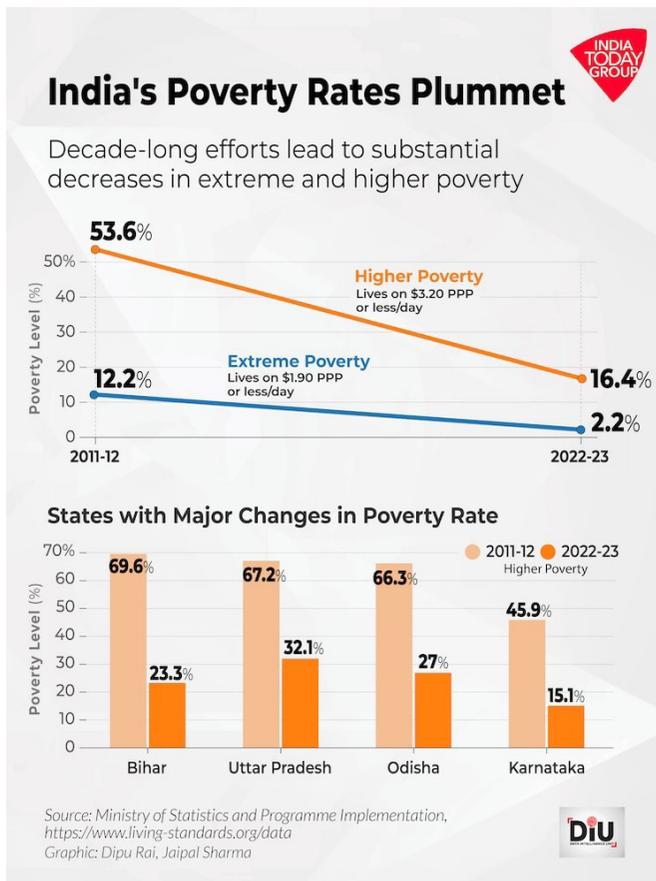
The implementation of Aadhaar, with this vision of “new welfare”, has enabled the Indian Federal government and its constituent states to distribute benefits to the poor directly through their Aadhaar-linked bank accounts. It has also helped to curb the usual corrupt middlemen in the delivery of subsidies to poor households that have long been a serious problem of welfare delivery in India.

Under this scheme, the Modi government in recent years has provided large quantities of essential goods such as toilets and cooking utensils, which normally had to be procured privately. According to former economic adviser to the Modi government in its first term, Arvind Subramanian, the calculation of the *new welfareism* is that there is a huge electoral opportunity in providing tangible goods and services, such as a toilet or a bank account, to the underprivileged classes. When the government promises cash or toilets, everyone can monitor the progress of whether the money reaches the new bank accounts or the toilets have been installed in the homes of lower income families (Anand *et al.*, 2020).

Despite its benefits in terms of efficiency and savings, Aadhaar has also been criticised for concerns related to privacy and data security. Some experts point out that the system could facilitate State surveillance and undermine democratic principles (Bhatia, 2021).

4 Social and gender inequalities

It is clear that the great challenge for the Indian government and society as a whole is to match the growth rates of the economy, reported in the previous section, with appropriate reforms so that larger percentages of the population can benefit from the country's increased influence and wealth. Along these lines and over the last decade, India has made significant progress in reducing poverty, especially in terms of multidimensional poverty, according to data provided by the United Nations Development Programme. Between 2015 and 2021, about 135 million people, especially in rural areas, were saved from multidimensional poverty, reducing the poverty rate from 24.85% to 14.96%. Rural areas reduced poverty most rapidly, from 32.59% to 19.28%, while poverty in urban areas declined proportionally less, from 8.65% to 5.27% (NITI Aayog, 2023).



However, according to a recent report by the World Inequality Lab, economic inequality in India is still one of the highest in the world, despite its recent economic growth. This report provides a detailed analysis of the distribution of wealth in India and highlights the growing economic disparities in the country. In terms of wealth, the richest 10% of the population owns 77% of the total national wealth and the richest 1% controls 53%. In contrast, the poorest half of the population has only 4.1% of the country's wealth (Bharti *et al.*, 2023).

A worrying aspect from the perspective of the Modi government that the report highlights is that economic inequality declined from India's independence in 1947 until the early 1980s. During those decades the current opposition Congress Party was the dominant force at the political level. Since then, inequality has been on the rise, with exponential growth, especially between 2014 and 2023, where the concentration of wealth among the country's elite has intensified, reaching its highest historical levels (Bharti *et al.*, 2023). In terms of national income share, India's economic elite outperforms even countries with high levels of inequality such as South Africa, Brazil and the United States.

The report also raises concerns about the regressive nature of India's tax system, when analysed from a net wealth perspective. Currently, the tax system fails to collect sufficient resources from the huge fortunes accumulated by the elite, contributing to persistent inequality. The World Inequality Lab report proposes a restructuring of tax policy that looks at both income and wealth, as well as greater public investment in key sectors such as health, education and nutrition, to ensure that the benefits of economic growth reach a larger part of the population and not just the elites, although it notes that such measures have been dismissed by both the Narendra Modi government and the most privileged economic sectors (Bharti *et al.*, 2023).

Another key aspect of the report, which points to a structural problem in India's ability to address the challenge of economic inequality and poverty, is the poor quality of economic data in the country's official sources, noting that the availability and accuracy of information has declined in recent years. As a result, current estimates of inequality are only tentative and do not fully reflect the economic reality of the country. This is a historical problem in India, but with advances in digitisation, economic progress and modernisation in other aspects of bureaucracy and public policy, it also underscores the need and responsibility of the Modi

government to improve data collection and ensure greater transparency in official information to design more effective policies against inequality (Bharti *et al.*, 2023).

Another aspect to consider in this framework is gender inequalities as India, among other problems in this field, has an unbalanced sex ratio due to practices such as selective abortion of female foetuses and preference for male children in many rural and urban areas. Femicide includes cases of dowry-related homicides, honour killings and prenatal femicides. This form of violence is rooted in the patriarchal structures of Indian society and is an extension of existing social, cultural and economic gender inequalities (Mitra vom Berg, 2021).

Expert Nishi Mitra vom Berg of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, in a chapter on this issue in Routledge's 2021 handbook on femicide, contextualises how the predominant social caste system —traditional gender norms and practices of control over female autonomy— contribute to India's maintenance of one of the highest rates of femicide in the world (Mitra vom Berg, 2021). The culture of impunity and lack of effective law enforcement also play a crucial role in perpetuating these crimes. The author argues that, despite advances in legislation such as the 2005 Act on protection against domestic violence, the implementation of these public policies is deficient in many areas of the country, especially in rural areas.

These patterns of behaviour analysed by Mitra vom Berg lead to the fact that in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, India is ranked 129th out of 146 countries analysed in the report on gender inequality. There is a significant gap in economic participation and opportunities for women, access to education and gender-based violence (Global Gender Gap Report, 2024).

Despite this situation of inequality, some progress has been made in recent years. According to data from the government of India's National Family Health Report, which covers 2019-2021 (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021), there has been an increase in the female literacy rate compared to previous reports. In the previous study of 2015-16, the female literacy rate was 70.3%, while in 2021 it reached 72.9%. This indicates a slight overall improvement in female literacy in India, although it is still below the male literacy rate, which in the most recent survey is 84.9% (International Institute for Population Sciences,

2021). Moreover, significant gender and regional disparities persist, especially in rural areas, where women still face significant social and cultural barriers to education.

With regard to gender-based violence, the National Family Health Report highlights that a significant proportion of women have experienced some form of domestic violence. Specifically, almost one in three women aged 15-49 (31.1%) have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by a partner at some point in their lives. Of the women who reported having experienced intimate partner violence, approximately 5.7% of them indicated that the violence occurred in the last twelve months. Although there has been a slight decrease in these cases compared to previous reports, the situation remains worrying, highlighting the need for more effective interventions. Institutional response and access to legal remedies to counteract this situation remain insufficient for many women, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021).

Finally, in this aspect of gender inequality, despite recent economic growth, women's labour force participation has declined in recent years. Factors such as socio-cultural norms, domestic responsibilities and lack of economic opportunities contribute to this disparity. Most women work in the agricultural sector, but mechanisation and lack of incentives have reduced opportunities in this sector. At the same time, employment in industry and the service sector has grown insufficiently to absorb female job seekers. In addition, domestic burdens and the lack of supporting infrastructure, such as childcare and adequate parental leave, hinder women's labour market integration. In particular, the decline in women's labour force participation in India is particularly noticeable in rural areas, where the percentage of employed women fell from 54% in 1980 to 31% in 2017 (Mahajan, 2024).

This decline was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the July-September quarter of 2020, the female labour participation rate fell to 16.1%, the lowest among major world economies. In times of crisis, Indian women were disproportionately affected, leading them to drop out of the labour force in large numbers, due to increased domestic responsibilities, childcare and school closures, and an increased burden of caring for sick family members (Yasir and Schmall, 2021).

Expert Nikita Mahajan highlights, in order to contextualise this worrying dynamic that has continued once the crisis of the

COVID-19 epidemic is over, the lack of opportunities in formal sectors and the predominance of informal work, where women face precarious conditions. The increase in girls' and women's education has not been sufficient to generate stable employment, as social norms continue to limit female participation in the labour market, especially after marriage. To reverse this trend, Mahajan proposes a series of measures such as public incentives for female employment, improvements in childcare infrastructure and a boost of sectors that have traditionally employed women, such as manufacturing and commerce. The author emphasises the need for active public policies to facilitate women's entry into the labour force and reduce the gender gap in the Indian economy (Mahajan, 2024).

The last factor of inequality to be highlighted in the current Indian context is the still fundamental influence on society of the caste structure, which is the social norm that structures the vast majority of the population of the Hindu religion, to which around 85% of India's citizens belong. One of the major obstacles to fairer and more equitable development in today's India is the rigid and hierarchical caste system of social organisation, which was legally dismantled in the 1950 Constitution but still has a decisive influence, especially in rural areas.

The age-old legacy of the caste system, a hierarchical social structure based on religious grounds linked to spiritual purity, still plays an essential role in the daily life of the population, especially in rural areas, and is one of India's major problems of inequality, particularly affecting its most disadvantaged social groups.

This division into closed groups called castes is the most characteristic element of the dominant religion in the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism, whose roots date back to around 1500 BC with the cultures that developed along the Indus River in the north-west of the subcontinent. Hinduism hierarchically divides members of its religion into castes or social groups by birth (Flood, 1998)¹.

Caste, which is inherited from parents to children and cannot be changed in a lifetime, has a religious connotation linked to the

¹ A detailed explanation of the religious, but also cultural and socio-economic implications of the caste system is developed in the following work: Gavin Flood. *Hinduism*. Madrid, Cambridge University Press, 1st edition 1996, 1st English edition 1998 and is the basis for the information in this section.

idea of reincarnation. According to this religion, the purest souls are reincarnated in those born in high castes, the most impure souls who have led an existence far from the religious path, the *dharma*, in past reincarnations, in the lowest castes.

Birth into a particular caste also has socio-economic implications as each group is linked to a particular social function: the higher castes, such as the Brahmins, are traditionally engaged in the most privileged and valued tasks for the population such as politics, religion or the army, while the lower castes occupy less socially considered roles such as peasants, artisans or masons, for example.

The very concept of caste is, however, misleading and does not include the full complexity of this social system. The word, which derives from Portuguese (where *casta* means type), began to be used by the representatives of this colonial power who arrived in India in the 15th century. The intention was to describe how the social structure of the people living in these territories was divided into a series of closed groups or types with a clear hierarchy among them.

Although from an external point of view the system seems unfair and dehumanised, for Hindus the caste system is a big family that protects and helps them in times of need, as there is solidarity between all its members, even if there are no direct kinship ties. The survival of the system is also based on the interrelationship between all groups and their functions. Even though social interaction may be non-existent from an economic and functional point of view, all castes fulfil an indispensable function and need each other to make society cohesive and functional.

However, the hereditary nature of the caste system, which perpetuates the structural injustice of this form of social organisation, clashed with the democratic principles and respect for human rights of the newly independent State of India. Despite the fact that the 1950 Constitution, which crowned the transition from the authoritarian system of the British Empire to an independent, secular democracy led by a government made up by the Indians themselves, outright prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, the age-old tradition of social organisation has adapted to the new circumstances and has survived.

Two groups have suffered most directly from this hierarchical and unjust dimension of the system. The so-called outcaste groups, also known derogatorily during British rule as untouchables and

as *Dalits* in their own language; and those belonging to tribes, also known as *Adivasis*, meaning ancient inhabitants, as the term refers to the original inhabitants of the subcontinent, who lived in the territory centuries before Hinduism even developed.

The *Adivasis* are a very heterogeneous group that includes a multitude of ethnic groups who, because they live in isolated areas such as forests or mountains, were not assimilated into the Hindu religious and cultural framework and are therefore outside the caste system and considered and treated as inferior by orthodox Hindus. There are more than 600 *Adivasi* tribal groups officially recognised after independence and the advent of democracy. They are called Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Flood, 1998).

In addition, according to the latest official population census of India in 2011, about 16.6% of the population belongs to the officially recognised Scheduled Castes (SCs), which include *Dalits*. This represented about 200 million people at that time. The population of *Adivasis* would be around 8.6% of the total population, which in the early 2010s would be about 100 million people (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). In both cases, they are a minority of the population, but at the same time they number tens of millions of people, indeed, more than two-thirds of the current inhabitants of the entire European Union, for example.

In the case of *Dalits*, according to the same 2011 census, the literacy rate is significantly lower than the national average at 66%, while the national average at that time was 74%. *Adivasi* suffer from an even more problematic situation with only a 59% literacy rate. *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women have an even lower literacy rate.

Dalits and *Adivasis* also represent a disproportionate percentage of the population living in poverty in India: approximately 40% of the *Dalit* population and 45% of *Adivasis* live below the poverty line, which is a clear indicator of their economic and social exclusion (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011).

It is not just a socio-economic problem, for instance, violence against *Dalits* from other more privileged groups, for example, remains a serious problem. According to a report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2021), more than fifty thousand cases of crimes against *Dalits* were recorded in 2020, including murder, physical assault, rape and harassment. *Dalit* scholar

Suraj Yengde in his 2019 book *Caste Matters* argues that, despite legal advances, caste continues to shape social, political and economic life in modern India. Yengde describes, with examples from his own life experience as a *Dalit* as well as with statistical data, the systemic discrimination faced by the less favoured castes and their efforts to organise themselves, fight for their rights and seek justice.

5 Domestic politics and regional tensions

In this section of the chapter we shall look at the performance of the world's largest democracy and the challenges of maintaining freedoms and rights for a population of over 1.4 billion people with the enormous diversity and distinct identities already reflected above.

Since independence in 1947, India has maintained, despite countless difficulties, one of the most fruitful democratic experiences of all the states that have emerged from the process of decolonisation. Like many other democracies today, it faces complex challenges such as the new digital environment with its opportunities to increase and streamline participation, but also problems such as misinformation and increasing polarisation.

In the Indian case, these issues shall be analysed within the framework of the trajectory of the governments of Narendra Modi, who came to power in 2014 with a message of political and economic regeneration that was inspiring for a majority of the electorate, and championing a Hindu vision of society in the face of a weakened opposition from the Congress Party and other forces that continue to support an identity built around the diversity of cultures and religions that amalgamate the Indian nation.

The consolidation of a democratic system in India has its roots in the influence the British exerted on the subcontinent during their colonial rule. The leaders who launched the Indian nationalist movement in the late 19th century, such as B. K. Gokhale or Lokamanya Tilak, admired the British political system and their main demand was that such a system be applied in Calcutta or Delhi with the same consistency as it was enforced in London or Edinburgh. The next generation of nationalist leaders, led by Mohandas K. Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru —both educated in English universities—, also showed their identification with democratic ideals, which they judged as contrary to the practices of the British Empire in India (Campos, 2003).

After independence in 1947, the values and principles of India's democratic system were formally enshrined in the 1950 Constitution. It sanctioned the political and legal equality of all citizens irrespective of race, religion, caste or gender. In its Constitution, India was constituted as a federal republic with two legislative chambers: the *Lok Sabha* (People's Assembly) and the *Rajya Sabha* (Council of States). Representatives of the former are elected by universal suffrage and are responsible for appointing the executive. *The Rajya Sabha* is a participatory body of the States that form the Indian Union, and its representatives are elected by the respective State parliaments.

The first elections were held in 1952 and gave power to Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress Party. From that year to the present, federal and state elections have been held regularly, although confidence in the political class has weakened. The generation that took over after Nehru's death in 1964, symbolised by Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi, changed the inclusive and open style of the Congress Party to a more top-down approach where loyalty to the leader became the guiding principle of this political force. Power began to shift from the Party's territory-wide membership and its representatives in Parliament to a series of privy councillors to the prime minister herself, a practice that has not been substantially altered in subsequent Party leaderships of a different persuasion.

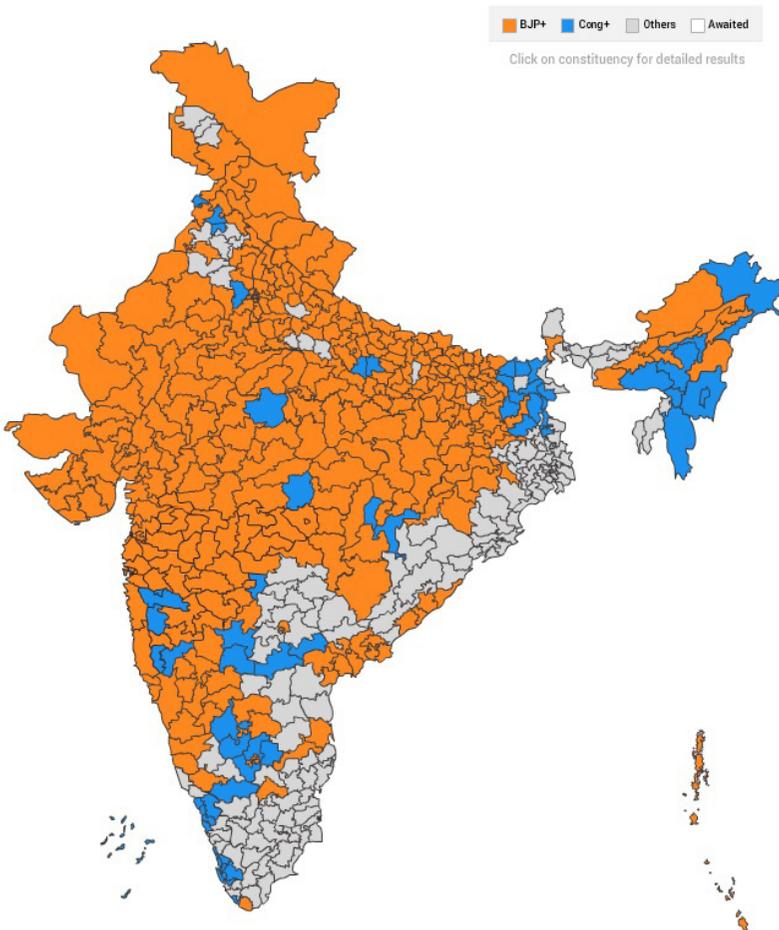
In 1977, cornered by various court decisions and growing political opposition, Indira Gandhi decreed a state of emergency, which for several months suspended constitutional rights. But even this brief period of absence of democratic guarantees, with judges dismissed, opponents imprisoned, and parliament shut down, ended in a new call for elections that Indira herself lost, giving the government for the first time to a coalition of political forces that did not include the Congress Party (Campos, 2003).

The Congress Party has become increasingly discredited over the years, turning into an electoral machine at the service of the Nehru-Gandhi family. After the assassinations of Indira (1984) and her son Rajiv (1991), the party is now run by his son Rahul Gandhi, who has lost the last three elections in a row to Narendra Modi's BJP.

Modi is the first Indian head of government since Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s to win two successive terms with a clear parliamentary majority, and in the 2024 elections he ratified his power

with a narrower victory that has allowed him to continue governing in coalition with other allied political forces.

In the 2014 elections, Modi won a historic victory with a clear message on the importance of promoting economic reforms, fighting Congress Party corruption and creating jobs for the young Indian population (Campos, 2019). In comparison, his campaign to renew the support of the Indian electorate in 2019 and 2024 has focused on national security and promoting his vision of *Hindutva*, or the Hindu way of life. A common factor in this electoral journey has also been his vision of India as a key player on the international stage that must regain the historical weight that Indian civilisation has had in human history, only overshadowed by the years of relative decline following the Western-led industrial revolution of the 19th century.



The coming to power of Modi and the BJP in 2014, in an election where they won an absolute majority for the first time in decades, is the focus of journalist Prashant Jha's book *How the BJP Wins: Inside India's Greatest Election Machine*. In it, Jha offers a detailed analysis of the strategies that have led the BJP to consolidate its position as a dominant political force in India, not only in the federal government but also in many states. Under Modi's leadership, the BJP has consolidated its dominance in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Bihar, where it has won major electoral victories at both the state and national levels.

Jha in his work not only takes into account the essential contribution of Modi's leadership to this achievement, but also that of other key BJP figures such as Amit Shah and innovative tools such as the use of digital technologies and support networks at the local and regional level for the creation of a successful electoral machinery.

Jha's work provides insight into the process of transformation of the BJP's Hindu nationalism from a peripheral narrative in Indian society in the 1950s and 1960s to the main ideological framework of a Party that has achieved three consecutive national electoral victories.

One of the keys to the BJP's success, according to Jha, is its ability to connect with diverse segments of Indian society. The party has been able to articulate a message that resonates both with aspirations for economic development and with nationalist and cultural sentiments. This duality has allowed it to attract voters from different castes, religions and regions, broadening its support base beyond its traditional strongholds. All of this is underpinned by a narrative of political change based on a liberal economic model and a new identity for India built around the majority religion of Hinduism (Jha, 2017).

In addition, the author analyses the BJP's strategic use of technology and social media. The party has been a pioneer in adopting digital platforms to spread its message, counter adverse narratives and mobilise its supporters. This innovation has given it a significant advantage in a country with a young and increasingly connected population. At the same time, it has generated strong dynamics of political polarisation, not only against supporters of the main opposition force of the Congress Party but between the *Hindutva* vision and that of India as a secular country and the identities of other religious groups such as Muslims.

According to the 2011 Census of India, the Muslim population was about 172.2 million, representing 14.2% of the total population at that time (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). The evolution of population growth over the last decade has increased the number of Indians professing Islam to over 200 million, making India the third largest Muslim country in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. Although Muslims remain a minority, they are a fundamental part of the population and the clash with Prime Minister Modi's *Hindutva* vision poses a significant risk of social confrontation.

The Narendra Modi government has implemented several recent policies that have generated controversy in relation to the Muslim minority. One of the most contentious is the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which grants Indian citizenship to refugees of religions that have their historical origin in the Indian subcontinent (Hindus, Sikhs or Buddhists, among others) from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, but excludes Muslims. This has been seen by many critics as a discriminatory measure, especially as it does not provide a similar avenue for persecuted Muslims in those countries (Guha, 2020). In addition, policies related to the National Register of Citizens in the Assam region have raised concerns, as it is feared that they may be used to exclude many Muslims who cannot provide the required documents, which could lead to the loss of their citizenship and legal rights.

These policies have been linked to the BJP's positions on the Ram temple in Ayodhya, a deeply controversial issue in Indian politics. The BJP has advocated the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the former Babri mosque, which was demolished by Hindu groups in 1992, an event that sparked violent religious riots. After years of legal wrangling, India's Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that the site should be handed over for the construction of the temple, which was seen as a victory for Hindu nationalist sectors led by the BJP. This link between policies towards Muslims and the Ram temple has reinforced the perception that the Modi government favours Hindu interests, which has increased inter-religious tensions in the country and has been criticised by many human rights advocates as a setback for religious equality and social cohesion (Pande, 2019).

The domestic political situation in the Kashmir region is particularly significant in this context, as it is the only region in India where the Muslim population is in the majority. This region,

located in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, has been the subject of territorial claims by India and Pakistan since the independence of both countries in 1947 and has recently held its first elections following the central government’s abolition of the region’s semi-autonomous status in August 2019.



Following a clash between India and Pakistan in the late 1940s over control of the territory, it was divided into two distinct regions: to the east and south is the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, with about two-thirds of the total territory. Its capital is Srinagar and 60% of its inhabitants are Muslims. To the north is

the Pakistani-dominated mountainous region known by Pakistan's rulers as Azad (Free) Kashmir, with its capital at Muzaffarabad.

Promises at this time by the Indian government to hold a UN-backed plebiscite to determine its future were never fulfilled. Pakistan refused to withdraw its army from the area under its control and the Indian government relied on this decision to close down the referendum option. Since the 1950s, the security situation in this region has been a constant source of conflict between India and Pakistan, which have experienced three wars caused directly or indirectly by the control of the territory of Kashmir (1948-1949, 1965 and 1971). From the 1980s onwards, the clashes have continued to be more focused between pro-Pakistan militias, identified as terrorist groups by the New Delhi Government and the Indian Army, leaving thousands dead in the following decades and an open wound that today has not found a diplomatic solution, despite attempts at reconciliation and dialogue at the beginning of the 21st century (Jacob, 2013).

Jammu and Kashmir's political autonomy within the Indian state has also suffered many limitations over time. In 1953, Kashmiri Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah was arrested on charges of fomenting separatist tendencies. Elections in different decades with suspected fraud, political repression with arrests of opposition leaders, decisive influence at certain periods from the federal government in New Delhi, are other examples of the restrictions on democracy in Kashmir.

Polarisation and tension in Kashmir have worsened under the Narendra Modi governments. David Devadas, a journalist and political analyst with extensive experience in Kashmir, explores in his recent book *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir*. The reasons behind the growing anger and radicalisation among Kashmiri youth, which the book's title makes explicit, are produced by a generation born after the rise of the insurgency in the 1990s that has grown up in an environment of violence, repression and lack of opportunities, leading to a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Devadas argues that the current generation is driven by a combination of historical grievances and state repression led by the central government, which has led to a continuous cycle of unrest and protest (Devadas, 2019).

The book examines the role of the Indian state in the Kashmir crisis, pointing out how government policies and militarisation of the region have further fuelled resentment among the youth.

Repression of demonstrations, censorship and human rights violations have generated an atmosphere of distrust and hostility towards the central government, culminating in the repeal of Article 370 in 2019, which removed the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, as a factor that exacerbated tension and deepened the sense of alienation among the local population.

A significant aspect in this context was that the state of Jammu and Kashmir was reorganised and the region of Ladakh was separated from it. The people of Ladakh, especially the majority Buddhist community in Leh, had long been demanding a separate administration from Kashmir, which was granted in 2019 at the initiative of Prime Minister Modi, albeit without its own legislature and under direct control of the central government. In the rest of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, this separation was met with protests and was another reason for disagreements with the government.

As another key element in the region, Devadas in his book also analyses the role of social media and technology in the radicalisation of a section of Kashmiri youth. With the increasing availability of the internet, narratives about the Kashmiri struggle have been amplified, allowing youth to connect with discourses of resistance and militancy more quickly and effectively. Devadas notes that, unlike previous generations who had moderate political leaders as references, the current generation has been influenced by extremist ideologies and has adopted a more militant approach to the struggle for self-determination. The author argues that without addressing the legitimate concerns of Kashmiris through dialogue and a more inclusive approach, rather than relying primarily on military force and state repression, the region could face further escalation of the conflict (Devadas, 2019).

In this regard, in the recent Jammu and Kashmir regional elections held in October 2024, the opposition alliance formed by the Congress Party and the National Conference (NC) won a significant majority, winning 48 seats, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won twenty-nine seats. These elections were the first in a decade in the region and the first since the central government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019. Voter turnout was remarkable, reaching 64%, indicating a significant engagement of the population in the democratic process.

The result is interpreted as a rejection of the BJP's policies in the region, especially the 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's auton-

omy, a move that was widely criticised and seen as an attack on Kashmiri identity. Omar Abdullah, leader of the National Conference, has advocated the restoration of the previous statehood status for Jammu and Kashmir.

The situation in Kashmir is not the only front of regional tension. There are security problems with armed groups in many other regions. One of the most significant is the Naxalite or Maoist insurgency, which operates in the so-called *red belt* of east-central India, encompassing states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Maharashtra. This movement, influenced by Maoist Communist ideology, has waged an armed struggle against the state since the late 1960s, claiming to defend the rights of peasants and indigenous tribe members. Although the insurgency has diminished in recent years due to military operations and development programmes, clashes with security forces persist in several areas of these states.

Another focus of conflict is in northeast India, where various separatist groups have sought autonomy or independence in states such as Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. In Assam, for example, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has carried out attacks on government and commercial targets since the 1970s. In Nagaland, demands for a "Greater Nagalim", which would include territories in China, India and Myanmar, have led to decades of clashes between insurgents and the army. Although the government has signed peace agreements with some groups, the region remains volatile due to ethnic rivalries and illegal arms trafficking.

Finally, it should be noted that there are tensions not linked to armed groups, such as those related to language and regional identity politics. One example is the persistent opposition to the imposition of Hindi as the national language in South India. In this region the native languages are of Dravidian origin from a family other than Hindi and other languages spoken in the north of the country are of Devanagari origin. In southern states such as Tamil Nadu, the central government's attempts to popularise Hindi as an official language since the 1960s were met with a powerful political and social movement that channelled the protest of millions of people over the years defending the use of Tamil and other regional languages against Hindi. These tensions have led the federal government to promote policies of linguistic plurality in administration and education. However, even today there is friction in southern states such as Karnataka, where local nationalist groups continue to protest the pre-eminence of Hindi,

insisting on the promotion of the regional language, Kannada. These disputes reflect India's linguistic diversity and the ongoing challenge of balancing regional identity with national unity.

6 Conclusions

Against the backdrop of these challenges, Narendra Modi's BJP government achieved a bittersweet result in the recent 2024 national elections. The Hindu nationalist party lost the absolute majority it had held alone for the last ten years, quite clearly in 2014 (303 MPs) and very broadly in 2019 (353 MPs), falling far short of the 272 that mark this majority. Only with its partners in the *National Democratic Alliance* coalition has it been able to garner enough votes for a third term in office.

The new legislature would have to take the new government of Narendra Modi and the BJP to 2029 if it is able to finish its current term. The big question mark hanging over its future performance is whether the prime minister will be able to redress this erosion of popular support and find more effective solutions to the demographic, economic, inequality and political problems discussed in this chapter to bring India to the privileged place in the international context that his government has always argued it deserves to achieve.

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CHAPTER TWO

Pares inter pares? India in the great power divide

Javier Fernández Aparicio

Abstract

Narendra Modi's accession to power in 2014 marked a significant shift in India's foreign policy away from the traditional approach of multilateralism and non-alignment towards a more active stance on the global stage. India seeks a strategic autonomy allowing it to operate independently from geopolitical fluctuations and the influence of the major powers. This can be seen in its relations with the United States, China and Russia. With the former, it has strengthened ties in sectors such as security, motivated by a mutual interest in countering China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region. With respect to its influential neighbour, China, India's relationship is complex and characterised by pendulum swings between competition and cooperation, border tensions, maritime tensions and outward projection from Southeast Asia to Africa. Russia, for its part, has historically been a key ally for India, especially in the defence sphere. However, since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, India has adopted a more pragmatic approach, benefiting from the purchase and sale of Russian crude oil and gas, strengthening agreements in various areas, especially bilateral trade, but showing certain signs of cooling and criticism from the Modi government of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Keywords

India, Russia, China, United States, Japan, Indo-Pacific.

1 Introduction: *Pares inter pares?* The Indian imperative

India, as a rising global power, actively participates in various international multilateral forums, from the G20 to the BRICS+. Historically, its foreign policy has been marked by non-alignment with specific blocs and its role as a leader of the Global South. However, India's participation in these forums also responds to its own national interests. Since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, India's foreign and security policy has undergone a shift towards what Samir Saran and Shashi Tharoor have termed the *Indian imperative*. This concept refers to the constant safeguarding of Indian interests in international affairs, ranging from its neighbourly relations to its interaction with the West (Saran and Tharoor 2020). This position is advocated by the current foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, who details the main lines of Indian foreign policy in another interesting work (Jaishankar, 2020).

This approach is reflected in Modi's intensified diplomatic trips and high-level meetings, especially after the elections concluded on 1 June 2024, which, although they saw the prime minister's re-election to the same post since 2014, also showed some attrition, covering countries from Southeast Asia to powers such as China, the United States, Japan, Russia and EU member states. Thus, India projects itself as a *Vishwa Mitra*, named after the celebrated Hindu sage and meaning *friend of the universe*, which seeks to cultivate global friendships and promote common welfare, without losing sight of the focus on self-interest and in a world order that is highly dynamic, complex and influenced by a variety of interests and the capacity to manage sometimes unpredictable or urgent threats and risks (Chaulia, 2024) .

However, another premise arising from India's peculiar relationship in the global order hides another characteristic: apart from the publication of treaties, minutes of bilateral or multilateral international meetings and rather generic declarations of its lines of action: i.e. there is no published national security strategy that informs its objectives in terms of security and foreign relations, threat perception or priorities. Precisely, an ambiguous relationship with the United States, Russia and China is a possible explanation for this absence, as the country can approach these relations from multiple angles, ranging from alliance to cooling off to direct confrontation, as in the case of China. Indeed, one of the reasons for avoiding such a document is the need to define

its position vis-à-vis China, which could position India as a clear antagonist, something that could prove problematic, in addition to dealing with sensitive cases, such as its relationship with Russia. Another reason could be political, as the image of strength that Prime Minister Narendra Modi projects could be compromised if the government is unable to respond quickly to a violation of the red lines set out in such a document (Fernández Aparicio, 2023).

2 The United States, from the periphery in diplomacy to the centre

The United States has now established itself as one of India's major trading partners, with bilateral exports and imports of goods and services exceeding EUR 184 billion¹. In terms of the bilateral relationship, the last three years have witnessed material progress in a number of areas, particularly in the economic, trade and security fields. In this period, the US has strongly supported India's international standing as a preferred partner in the Indo-Pacific framework, as expressed in the Biden Administration's February 2022 Strategy:

"We will continue to build a strategic partnership in which the United States and India work together and through regional groupings to promote stability in South Asia; collaborate in new domains, such as health, space, and cyber space; deepen our economic and technology cooperation; and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific. We recognize that India is a like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active in and connected to Southeast Asia, a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora, and an engine for regional growth and development²".

Indeed, the US has reaffirmed its support for India's role as a regional leader in Asia, no doubt in response to its interest in acting as a counterweight to China's projection in the region, as well as to the further strengthening of the Chinese-Russian alliance, although here US interest clashes with the advantages India derives from its own relationship with Russia. Prime Minister

¹ See: India-US Bilateral Relations - A Brief. *Ministry of External Affairs of India*. [Accessed 22/1/2025]. Available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Ind-US-Brief.pdf>

² See: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States. [Accessed: 22 January 2025]. Available at: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

Modi's State visits to Washington in June 2023 and President Biden's participation in the G20 summit held in New Delhi the following September, along with other high-level meetings, underline an emerging close cooperation between India and the US in strategic areas such as defence and security, climate change and clean energy, space exploration and cyber-security, the latter two already considered domains of enormous importance in the war scenario, key to the hybrid confrontation, in the so-called grey zone, of the world's great powers. In February 2024, the review of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy once again confirmed India as a preferred partner for the United States³.

The US-India strategic partnership is underpinned by the narrative of shared values, such as commitment to democracy and upholding the rules-based international system, promoting the connectivity of the two countries and their environment through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue between the US Secretaries of State and Defence and their Indian counterparts, and dozens of bilateral dialogues and working groups, ranging from space and health cooperation to energy trade and technology, as well as seeking a common voice in shared international forums, such as the United Nations —where India seeks a permanent seat on the Security Council—, the G20, financial bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation, as well as in regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), where India and the US seek to maintain similar positions.

However, while relations and cooperation between the two countries have been strengthened, especially on security issues, there have been some contentious episodes, such as the controversy over the assassination of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and the subsequent investigations in the US into other related incidents, as well as questions in the US press regarding the supposedly values-based nature of the bilateral alliance, or President Biden's statements comparing Japan and India to Russia and China in terms of xenophobic and anti-im-

³ See: The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific: Marking Two Years Since the Release of the Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy. *US Department of State*. [Accessed: 22 January 2025]. Available at: <https://2021-2025.state.gov/the- united-states-enduring-commitment-to-the- indo-pacific-marking-two-years-since-the-release-of-the-administrations- indo-pacific-strategy/>.

migrant attitudes, which generated a strong reaction in India. Notwithstanding these controversial episodes, the general lines of good relations between the two countries have not been affected and are tending to strengthen (Ramesh and Rubin, 2024).

During his visit to the US, Modi addressed a meeting with Indo-Americans in New York on 23rd September, telling them about the bilateral partnership in various sectors and how “America-India is the AI Power of the New World”, also announcing plans to open two new Indian consulates in Boston and Los Angeles⁴.

2.1 The Indo-US Diaspora

The Indian diaspora in the United States plays a crucial role in strengthening ties between the two countries. Approximately close to five million Indo-Americans or people of Indian origin reside in the US, the third largest Asian ethnic group in the country after people of Chinese and Japanese origin, settling mainly in four states: California (20% of the diaspora), Texas (12%), New Jersey (9%) and New York (7%). In September 2019, during his visit to the United States, the prime minister shared with then President Trump, *Howdy Modi*, a mega event held in Houston, where the two leaders highlighted the strategic partnership between the two countries in front of more than fifty thousand people, the vast majority from the diaspora, an event that received an immense media coverage. On his June 2023 tour to the United States, the diaspora was very much present and, in addition to the meeting with President Biden and other important institutional events, Modi’s meetings with Indo-Americans were again high on his calendar during his US sojourn. He even hosted hundreds of people at another meeting at the Ronald Reagan Center in Washington, organised by the influential Bharat Barai, a popular Indo-US leader and organiser of the event, where he also connected with other Indian communities in different US cities⁵.

The diaspora in the US is increasingly active in US-India relations and is represented by various organisations, both commu-

⁴ See: America-India is the AI power of the New World: PM Modi. *News India Times*. 55, no. 39 (subscribers’ ed.), pp. 14-15. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=180096296&lang=es&site=ehost-live>

⁵ See: Today’s changed India will surprise you: PM concludes US visit, leaves for Egypt. *India Today*. [Accessed: 22 January 2025]. Available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/prime-minister-modi-us-visit-indian-diaspora-address-changed-transformed-india-ronald-reagan-center-2397226-2023-06-24>

nity and professional, that are recognised for their significant contributions in multiple sectors, including politics. The Indian diaspora has functioned as a catalyst for strengthening the relationship between the two nations, with five members of Congress of Indian origin currently holding office.

In the recent US presidential elections, this Indian community, historically favourable to the Democrats, supported Kamala Harris, a candidate of Indian descent, a milestone for the community⁶. As in the case of other communities, such as the Hispanic community, the new generations of Indo-Americans, who have settled in the country for decades, are making political positions increasingly complex within the community itself. Examples are figures such as Kash Patel, appointed Director of the FBI; Arvind Krishna, CEO of IBM; Ajaypal Singh Banga, CEO of Mastercard; Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft; or Vivek Ramaswamy, an Indo-American businessperson with political aspirations, close to Trump, as he was in fact going to head the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), an advisory commission to supposedly restructure the federal government, eliminate regulations and reduce spending. Ramaswamy was the subject of controversy within the president's entourage when he criticised the prioritisation of nationality rather than academic excellence in the selection of candidates for various jobs, even if they come from abroad⁷. However, the legislative projects of Donald Trump's new administration are beginning to cause some misgivings in the diaspora, as a new executive order signed by the president on 21 January states that children born to foreign passport holders, including tourists, students and visa workers, will no longer automatically receive US citizenship, which may have consequences for the more than one million Indians who are waiting to obtain US citizenship, most of them justified in their employment. According to US census data analysed by the Pew Research Center, of the approximately five million Indo-Americans in the United States, 34% became citizens when they were born in the United States⁸.

⁶ See: La diáspora india en EE. UU. se resiste a Trump reflejada en las raíces de Harris. *Eldiario.es*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/politica/diaspora-india-ee-uu-resiste-trump-reflejada-raices-harris_1_11781712.html

⁷ See: Was Vivek Ramaswamy fired from DOGE for angry H-1B tweet. *Times of India*. [Accessed 18 February 2025]. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/vivek-ramaswamy-doge-american-lazy-h-1b/articleshow/117507889.cms>

⁸ See: Trump pone fin a la ciudadanía por nacimiento y provoca un fuerte rechazo en la diáspora india. *La República* [Accessed 23 January 2025]. Available at: <https://larepublica.es/2025/01/22/trump-pone-fin-a-la-ciudadania-por-nacimiento-y-provo-ca-un-fuerte-rechazo-en-la-diaspora-india/>

Some of the presidential team, such as Elon Musk, however, advocate the removal of these restrictions on visas designed to attract skilled workers from abroad. A 70% of these visas go to Indian engineers, who join the big tech companies such as Tesla, Google and Amazon, or the *start-up* sector, which is being nurtured by already more than promising figures such as Baiju Bhatt, founder of *Robin Hood*; Rohan Seth with *Clubhouse*; Apoorva Mehta of *Instacart*, or Jay Chaudhry, with *Zscaler Internet Access*⁹.

2.2 Bilateral cooperation and interests

The United States and India already have a very strong commercial relationship, based on growing economic cooperation and a mutual commitment to promote bilateral trade and investment. In addition, with respect to economic relations, the two countries share a number of forums and dialogue mechanisms that strengthen this strategic partnership. These include the India-US Trade Policy Forum (TPF), established in 2005 and renewed in early 2024, which serves as a key platform for resolving trade barriers and promoting balanced trade; or the India-US Commercial Dialogue or the India-US CEO Forum, which represent important spaces for interaction between the public and private sectors of both countries, facilitating joint initiatives to boost trade and investment in priority areas such as technology, manufacturing and clean energy. The India-US Economic and Financial Partnership Dialogue (EFP) addresses macroeconomic and financial issues, promoting stability and growth in both economies. Major Indian companies operating in the US are banking companies such as HDFC Bank Limited and ICICI Bank Limited, technology services such as Infosys Limited and Wipro Limited, plus pharmaceuticals such as Dr. Reddy's Laboratories Limited, in that order of importance¹⁰. On the US side, technology majors such as Adobe Systems, Google, IBM, Apple and Microsoft have a strong presence in India, along with large corporations in the beverage sectors, led by Coca Cola and PepsiCo, banking with JP Morgan Chase, *hardware* accessories such as Hewlett Packard and financial services such as American Express¹¹.

⁹ See: 5 estadounidenses de origen indio que dirigen algunas de las empresas más exitosas de Silicon Valley. *Global Indian*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at <https://www.globalindian.com/es/historia/la-iniciativa-empresarial/5-empresarios-indios-americanos/>

¹⁰ Indian Companies on The US Stock Market. *Stock Analysis*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://stockanalysis.com/list/indian-stocks-us/>

¹¹ See: Top 10 Best American Companies in India - World Blaze, <https://www.worldblaze.in/best-american-companies-in-india/>

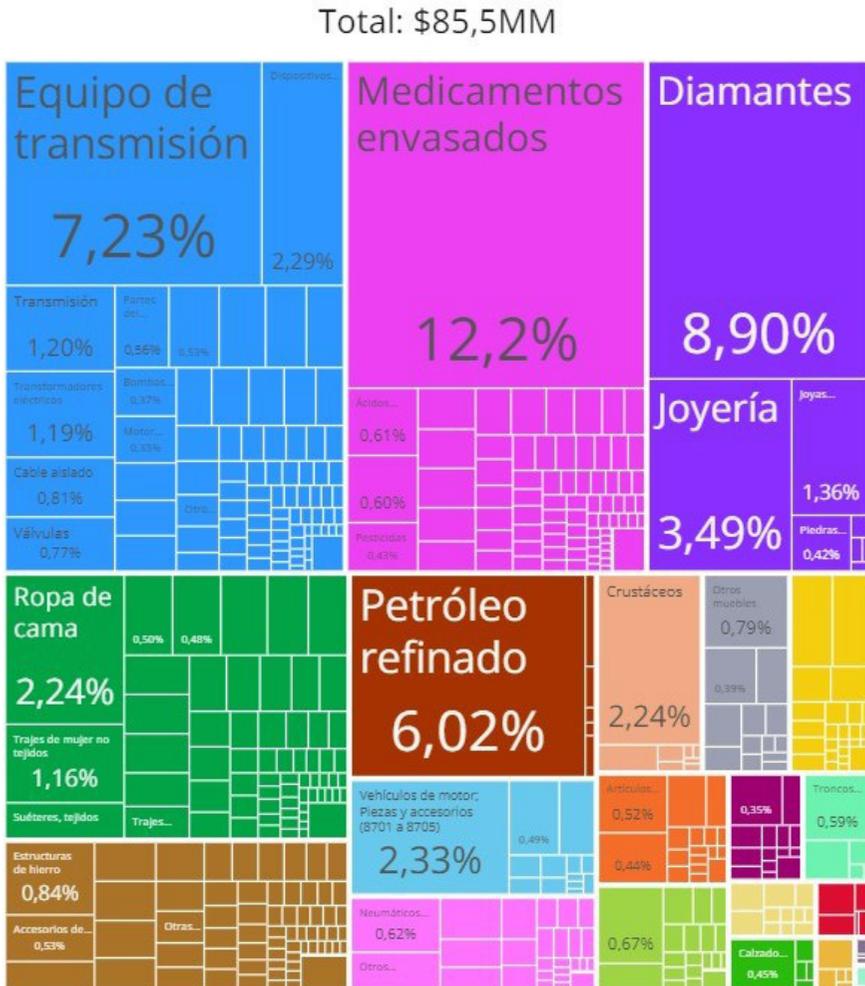


Figure 1: India's exports to the United States (2023). Source: [HYPERLINK "https://oec.world/es/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/usa?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2023"](https://oec.world/es/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/usa?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2023) Trade between India (IND) and the United States (USA) The Observatory of Economic Complexity

In the regional context, both countries are active participants in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a multilateral forum launched in May 2022. This framework was designed to strengthen economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific following Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, during his first term in office. The IPEF reflects the renewed commitment of the United States and India to work together with other countries in the region to build resilient supply chains, promote sustainability and foster

renewed in 2015 for ten years and is due for review in 2025. Since 2018, India was included as a top-tier country in the US Department of Commerce's Strategic Trade Authorisation licensing exception, but in addition to annual bilateral dialogues, joint military exercises and defence industry acquisitions are common. In this regard, in August 2024, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman met with US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, signing key agreements such as the Security Supply Agreement (SoSA). Indian procurement from the US defence industry has grown significantly, exceeding USD 20 billion during 2024, and includes platforms such as the C-130J, C-17, Apache, Chinook, MH60R and P8I helicopters.

Within security, cooperation in the cyber field is also closer, within the India-US Cybersecurity Framework, signed in September 2016 or the Ransomware Initiative, a multicountry synergy project in the fight against cyber-attacks led by the United States since November 2022, with the significant absences of Russia and China¹². Cybersecurity cooperation between the two nations reached a high point when in 2020 India accepted the US invitation to participate in the *Blue Dot Network*, an initiative launched a year earlier with Australia and Japan to invest in joint projects in energy supply, infrastructure building and digitisation specifically in the Indo-Pacific area.

Meanwhile, many US and Indian approaches to nuclear policy also appear to be shared, especially with regard to security at facilities, where there is consolidated and focused cooperation on securing component supply chains, as well as strategies to address threats such as the cyber vulnerability of nuclear facilities (Kapur, Pillai Rajagopalan and Wueger, 2024). India is currently building six fast reactors to be operational by 2033, and the Modi government has also expressed its desire to be admitted as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), so that it can export nuclear technology for peaceful purposes to other countries. In the NSG's plenary meetings since 2016, the Indian proposal has won US approval, but has always met with China's outright rejection, since to be part of this organisation, one condition is that the country must also be a signatory to the International Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which India does not meet because it considers it restrictive, and another country

¹² See: Counter Ransomware Initiative. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. At: <https://www.counter-ransomware.org/>

such as Pakistan is not a signatory either. However, in January 2025, the US announced the lifting of restrictions on more than 200 Indian nuclear entities dating back to 1998¹³.

While India's goodwill with the US is growing, that with Pakistan, India's traditional enemy, is deteriorating. While until a few years ago successive US Administrations sought cooperation with Pakistan, today there is great tension, aggravated even more since the failed US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, plus the evident strengthening of relations between Pakistan and China, even though Pakistan's national security policy is in line with the country's non-alignment¹⁴.

2.3 The Trump effect, can there be a change in dynamics?

Aside from the discomfort of part of the diaspora with the new Trump administration's domestic policies, it seems unlikely that there will be any substantial change between India and the US in foreign relations, although there are some unknowns that will become clearer over time. Firstly, whether India will be affected by US protectionist measures, as back in 2017, with Trump in the US Presidency, New Delhi protested against the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), provisions that sanctioned countries that imported Russian equipment and weapons, a situation that India was in with the purchase of the S-400 missile system at the time. Both the Russians and Indians reacted by devising a plan to continue with the sale and purchase, whilst circumventing the US sanctions. The war in Ukraine and the Biden Administration's attempts to woo India meant that in the end the Indian case was considered an exception to CAATSA.

After Netanyahu, in February, Narendra Modi was the second international leader to visit the White House after Donald Trump's inauguration and meet with Trump and senior members of the new US Administration, including adviser Elon Musk, discussing Starlink's entry into India's defence and technology industry, which President Trump followed up by offering Modi a trade deal

¹³ See: Sagar Madela, V. US to revoke historical restrictions on India's nuclear entities. *Nuclear Engineering Magazine*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/us-to-revoke-historical-restrictions-on-indias-nuclear-entities/>

¹⁴ Naseer, N. Breaking the Mold: The Evolution of US-Pakistan Cooperation Beyond Security. *Stimson*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/evolution-of-us-pakistan-cooperation-beyond-security/>

and India's purchase of US equipment and aircraft, and citing the need for balanced trade between the two countries¹⁵. The issue of possible tariffs also came up.

The Biden Administration had sanctioned several Russian companies in the oil sector, some of them in charge of selling crude oil to India, which it then resells refined in a lucrative trade, which annoyed US government officials¹⁶. As in the case of China, Trump's entourage has also suggested a change of perception towards India if it continues to stay out of sanctions against Russia or planned sanctions against China in the form of tariffs, and it should not be forgotten that China is India's main trading partner. However, there is a certain bonhomie between Modi and Trump, epitomised by the prime minister's visit to Washington in mid-February, which will help maintain a smooth relationship, as well as a shared concern about China, so that trade frictions may be overshadowed by the US need to move its supply chains away from China —where India would be an alternative hub— and defence cooperation, but here too there is uncertainty, which already exists in other arenas such as NATO and Europe, as to whether Trump might push India to take on more of the burden of security issues in the Indo-Pacific, which might even provoke a clearly confrontational stance towards China¹⁷.

What will happen on other issues where there are common strategic initiatives of both countries so far? For example, in terms of the fight against climate change and the processes of implementing clean energy, since both countries share forums such as the Climate and Development Alliance, the Paris Agreement within the United Nations Convention on Climate Change —from which Trump has already announced the United States' exit after taking office— or the Triangular Development Partnership (TriDeP) Programme, with the specific objective of strengthening cooperation for India's development, supporting renewable energy projects. Another

¹⁵ See: PM Modi likely to meet Elon Musk, Starlink's entry in India to be discussed: Report. *The Hindu*, 13 February 2025. [Accessed 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-likely-to-meet-elon-musk-starlinks-entry-in-india-to-be-discussed-report/article69213885.ece>

¹⁶ See: La India defiende a casi una veintena de empresas sancionadas por EE. UU. por apoyar a Rusia. *abc.com* [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.abc.com.py/internacionales/2024/11/02/la-india-defiende-a-casi-una-veintena-de-empresas-sancionadas-por-eeuu-por-apoyar-a-rusia/>

¹⁷ See: Siddiqui, H. Trump and India: How will Modi and Trump engage in the new era. *Financial Express*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/trump-and-india-how-will-modi-and-trump-engage-in-the-new-era/3715035/>

issue is that of energy cooperation, where India could benefit or, conversely, be disadvantaged as the US emerges as a reliable substitute for Russia as a major supplier of energy resources¹⁸.

3 QUAD and Japan: where the Indo-Pacific is born

QUAD is perhaps the forum where the US and India are, *a priori*, most in tune with public opinion, sharing this forum with two allies that are becoming key partners for India, such as Australia and, above all, Japan. Heir to the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSC), the three-way meetings between the United States, Japan and Australia since 2002 was joined by India in 2007 at the proposal of the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and since then there has been speculation about the arrival of more Indo-Pacific countries, such as South Korea and New Zealand. In some quarters —including high-ranking US officials such as the CIA Director during Donald Trump's first term in office, Mike Pompeo— QUAD is described as a Pacific NATO project, emphasising the increasingly binding nature of the forum on defence and security issues, and even China is beginning to perceive it as a hostile alliance¹⁹.

However, the truth is that QUAD for India is more than just a possible military-focused alliance with China as the main target. The aforementioned minister, Jaishankar, during the Raisina Dialogue 2023 forum, argued that QUAD should be an international forum with a common minimum for sharing resources and technology, with security being one more issue, which should be focused on a collaborative partnership in cases of natural disasters, terrorist events, the security of maritime routes and the security of water and energy supplies, always under the umbrella of UN resolutions²⁰.

At the last QUAD meeting in September 2024 in the US city of Wilmington in the US, the increased assertiveness of the partner-

¹⁸ See: Jayaraman, T. V. USAID Administrator Power And Indian Ambassador Kwatra Discuss India-US Emerging Strategic Initiatives. *News India Times*. 55, no. 41 (subscribers' ed.), p. 5. [Accessed: 18 february 2025]. Available at: <https://search.ebsco-host.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=180317689&lang=es&site=ehost-live>

¹⁹ See: Srinivasan, J. Can the Quad rise to be an Asian NATO? *The Hindu Business Line*. [Accessed: 18 february 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/can-the-quad-rise-to-be-an-asian-nato/article32103609.ece>

²⁰ See: Shidore, S. Raisina Dialogue Highlights India's Global Balancing Act. *The Diplomat*, ed. subscribers. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/raisina-dialogue-highlights-indias-global-balancing-act/>

ship across the Indo-Pacific was noted, announcing investments in technology, infrastructure, connectivity and resilience, but also a controversial point such as the willingness, from January 2025 onwards, of the QUAD countries to combine joint exercises and patrol the waters that make up this huge scenario arena for the sake of security of the sea routes, including the South China Sea, a huge hotbed of tension, a huge source of tension, starting with the status of Taiwan, where the Indian Navy could be involved in some friction with Chinese vessels. In addition, India will for the first time host the seventh QUAD meeting in 2025, an example of its involvement in this forum²¹.

One of India's preferred partners is Japan, with which it also shares a place in the QUAD, but which is emerging as more than a country with common alliances in the Indo-Pacific context. Cultural and exchange relations between Japan and India run deep and began in the 6th century BCE, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan. Indian culture has had a great impact on Japanese culture, and even in World War II, the Japanese Empire supported the creation of the Indian National Army, whose most prominent figure was Subhas Chandra Bose and which collaborated with the Japanese in their fight against the British in South Asia. This collaboration resulted in, for example, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands eventually joining the union after independence in 1947, and the figure of Judge Radhabinod Pal (1886-1967) at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946, which judged Japanese crimes during World War II and was in favour of exonerating the accused of the charges. Ultimately, Japan and India established diplomatic relations in 1952, one of the first countries in Asia after the conflict.

The bilateral relationship was elevated to the category of a comprehensive and strategic partnership when, in September 2014, Prime Minister Modi paid an official visit to Japan and held a summit with Abe, shortly after which Abe paid an official visit to India and, among other agreements, began to talk about the concept of the Indo-Pacific as the union of the two oceans, Pacific and Indian, in the same geopolitical scenario, a term later taken up by

²¹ See: Mohan, R. The Wilmington Summit: A Consolidation Of The Quad - Analysis. *Eurasia Review*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: https://www.eurasiareview.com/03102024-the-wilmington-summit-a-consolidation-of-the-quad-analysis/#-google_vignette

the United States and where Japan and India would be the most visible representatives within this enormous geopolitical union²².

Since then, there have been regular high-level bilateral meetings between Prime Minister Modi and his Japanese counterparts, Yoshihide Suga, Fumio Kishida and, in October 2024, the current Shigeru Ishida. These meetings always reiterate the commitment of both countries to Japan's FOIP vision, an acronym for its policy of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", and cooperation agreements are signed in the areas of investment and infrastructure construction —construction of highways, railways and subways such as the New Delhi Metro, port facilities—, the implementation of Japanese technology and automobile industry workshops in India. As for defence policy, with joint naval exercises and the pact for the reciprocal provision of supplies and services between the Indian Armed Forces and Japan's Self-Defence Forces, signed in 2020, which allows the respective Navies to dock and repair ships in ports in both countries, all of which increases Japan's projection in India and strengthens the bilateral relationship.

4 China, on a collision course?

China's growing influence and the instruments it uses to promote its interests, notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), mean that interactions between the two Asian giants range between suspicion, cooperation and hostility. China is India's main trading partner, which contrasts with their traditionally bad relationship, especially the huge, shared border in the Himalayas, with an unresolved status and issues such as the Dalai Lama's exile in Indian territory, while at the same time both countries share international forums and signs of frank détente. Despite protectionist economic policies, such as the Modi government's *Make in India Programme* since 2014, India is currently running a trade deficit with China. In 2024, while India's exports to China declined by 22%, Chinese imports increased by 15%, mostly involving cheap Chinese products in the technology, machinery and chemicals markets²³.

²² See: Kuo, M. A. The Origin of 'Indo-Pacific' as Geopolitical Construct. *The Diplomat*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

²³ See: Minhas, A. India-China trade relations - statistics & facts. *Statista*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/topics/13109/india-china-trade-relations/#topicOverview>

However, the question remains as to whether economic dependence on China will make it feasible for India, which depends on China for high technology or components used in the manufacture of equipment, to make a significant shift away from China bearing such dependency in mind. In fact, in August 2023 the Modi Government tried to make it more difficult to import Chinese technology, but India's own industrial dependence on China forced it to scrap these plans. Seeking alternatives that also hinder bilateral relations, such as greater Indian economic engagement with Taiwanese companies, encouraging the opening of semiconductor manufacturing facilities or facilitating mutual labour mobility, seems extremely risky, as Chinese telecommunications companies and mobile phone equipment manufacturers may react by ceasing to invest in India. A precedent was set in 2019 when India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the trade agreement between China and fourteen other Asian countries, citing onerous tariffs and differential treatment of Indian companies in China, a move that, however, led to a widening of India's trade deficit with the huge Asian power (Pant and Mankikar, 2024).

The border issue also persists in the Himalayas. Since 1962, the year of the first war between the two countries, and with the status of the present Line of Control, which serves as a huge border of approximately 3500 km, Aksai Chin, in Chinese hands but claimed by India, and Arunachal Pradesh, on the contrary, continue to be a source of conflict between the two countries. Since then, there has been a permanent Indo-Chinese commission negotiating some normality on the border and there have been moments of détente, such as in 2019 and 2020, when Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi pledged to resolve the differences, but also other situations of direct confrontation, the latest in the Galwan Valley in 2020, including dozens of Indian and Chinese soldiers killed in a pitched fight with stones and sticks. In October 2024, during the BRICS+ meeting in Kazan, Russia, Xi and Modi again staged an agreement on the Himalayan borders in the form of joint patrols, opening of passes, joint trade and military delegations, an agreement further implemented at a subsequent meeting in Beijing in December between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. But questions remain about the future, as India has persistently accused China of repopulating, militarising and building new infrastructure in the Himalayas, such as tunnels, highways and dams, which could either facilitate the rapid

transport of troops to this border by China or which could control the water supply of the main rivers that flow through India but originate in current Chinese territory, alluding also to the complicated relationship with Bhutan and Nepal, both countries in a fragile balance between the two powers²⁴.

In this game of rivalries on the northern border with Pakistan and China, not coincidentally also on good terms in their bilateral relations, nuclear deterrence has also been an essential point in understanding the irresolution of the conflict and its freezing to the present day. Both China and India have shown a clear evolution in terms of the potential performance of their nuclear arsenal and the strategic perspective of its use. While in 1999 India's *No-First* Doctrine limited the use of nuclear capabilities to an attack by an enemy country with this same weapon, in a clear reference to Pakistan, the reforms introduced to this doctrine in 2003 and 2010 opened the door to the use of nuclear weapons in the event of an attack by other types of weapons of mass destruction. The context of Pakistan's deterrence of China was broadened to include the testing of long-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching Chinese territory and vice versa, with Chinese tests of the same missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads and reaching any point in India.

Nuclear deterrence is an obstacle to a material escalation of border hostilities in the Himalayas (Topychkanov and Saalman, 2021) , differences that are reproduced in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) of undoubted strategic interest and priority for India, with China's economic presence, beyond loans and infrastructure projects, in Pakistan, through the port of Gwadar, Bangladesh with Peking, Sri Lanka with Colombo and Hambantota, or the Indian Ocean islands, such as the Maldives and Mauritius, where the struggle between the two powers is being transferred to the internal political sphere of these island nations, as well as the East African coastal states, such as Djibouti, all places where there is speculation that China could host submarines.

For its part, how much of a perceived threat to China might India feel? Without forgetting the more than symbolic demographic overtaking as the world's most populous country in 2023, plus the shared geographical position and the border conflict with its

²⁴ See: Sharma, Y. 'Dam for a dam': India, China edge towards a Himalayan water war. *Al Jazeera*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/1/24/dam-for-a-dam-india-china-edge-towards-a-himalayan-water-war>

possible implications of three nuclear powers such as India itself, China and Pakistan, it is above all the strategic alliances that both powers opt for —the US on the Indian side, Russia on the Chinese side, with nuances— which makes China perhaps see India as a systemic risk in the future, not so much at present, while India perceives China as more of a regional threat and, above all, currently focused on a maritime projection that can close the country within its borders. Since 2018, China and Pakistan have been strengthening their alliance, expressed in the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which, albeit with interruptions, may be the implementation of a project that directly connects China to the Indian Ocean, bypassing India.

China's Biggest Exports

Total Value of China's Exports by Country

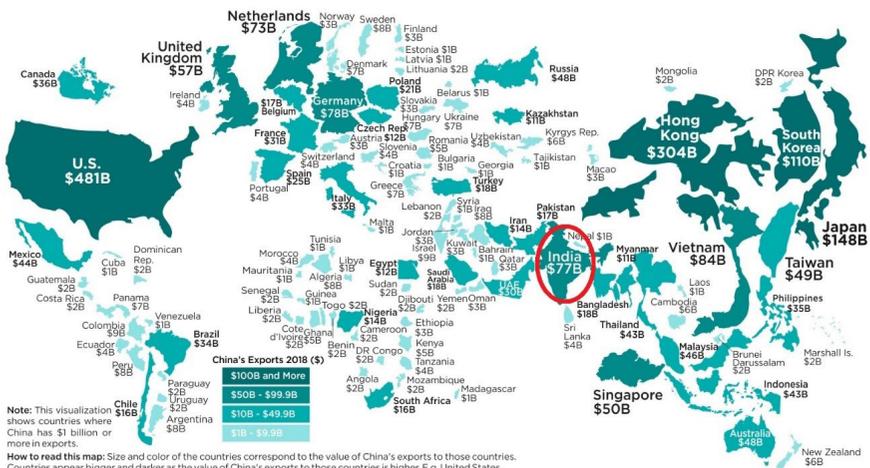


Image 3: In this infographic updated to 2024 with China's global exports, it can be seen that, after the United States, Japan and Southeast Asia, India is a natural recipient of Chinese products, on a par with Germany. Source HYPERLINK "https://howmuch.net/" HowMuch.net - Understanding Money

4.1 From traditional Himalayan rivalry to maritime rivalry

The scenario of China and India's struggle moves to other key regions of the continent such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia and India's very neighbours, with China having a significant presence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. This presence is, above all, manifested through the construction of huge port infrastructures that give it access to the Indian Ocean in clear competition with India, for example from the Pakistani port of Gwadar, the

scene of joint Chinese-Pakistani naval manoeuvres, or from the Bangladeshi port of Pekua, in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, with the capacity to house a fleet of submarines. Not to mention China's projection in Africa, another continent where India is also vying for a greater presence. In fact, it is undoubtedly this challenge posed to India by China's presence in South Asia that has determined and explains why New Delhi has moved forward in international affairs in pursuit of its own interests and in this specific field, increasingly aligning itself with allied powers that see China as a systemic rival, such as, principally, the aforementioned United States (Sigdel, 2020).

Some analysts point out that repopulation operations, infrastructure construction and land-based reinforcements in the Himalayas are very similar in their objectives to Chinese maritime operations in the South China Sea: focused on exerting increasing deterrence, in one case, towards India and, in the other, towards Taiwan (Blasko, 2024). A rivalry in the maritime sphere that is projected to other parts beyond the South China Sea, towards the Pacific Ocean and the so-called Indian Ocean Region (IOR), an Indian strategic priority through the strengthening and modernisation of naval power, which is key to facing external threats and other possible risks to the country's stability, such as trade and supply chains.

The Indian Navy has been one of the fastest growing and most modernised in the world, with the launch of its first indigenously built aircraft carrier, the *INS Vikrant*, in September 2022, making it one of the largest and gradually leaving behind an ageing traditional fleet. The Navy is focusing on the development of platforms that respond to the new reality, such as anti-submarine vessels, patrol vessels, unmanned aerial vehicles or reconnaissance aircraft, and an effective expansion of its forces, including the sale of patrol vessels to African and Indian Ocean Island States. In January 2025, the Indian Navy had 64 ships of various types but it is projected to reach 200 by 2050. In addition, most of the ships are being built in Indian shipyards, following the programme to revive indigenous industry: *Make in India*²⁵.

The naval doctrine, which dates from 2015, includes as India's priority area the area stretching from the Arabian Sea and the

²⁵ See: Chatterjee, S. Navy Day, 2020: Year-End wrap-up on our sentinels of the sea. *The Statesman*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thestatesman.com/features/navy-day-2020-year-end-wrap-up-on-our-sentinels-of-the-sea-1502939147.html>

Bay of Bengal to the Cape of Good Hope and the east coast of Africa, plus the Strait of Malacca and the Indonesian and Malaysian archipelagos, with Pakistan considered a lesser maritime threat compared to China's naval presence. India's deployment at sea is projected as part of its military and diplomatic influence in this vast region, with capabilities to detect, monitor and counter Chinese naval activity. To this end, joint exercises are conducted with other countries, such as the United Kingdom (*Konkan Shakti*), France (*Varuna*), Singapore (*SIMBEX*), Japan (*JIMEX*) and Indonesia (*Samudra Shakti*), or multinational exercises such as the Malabar—an annual exercise in the Bay of Bengal between India, Japan, the United States and Australia, the QUAD countries—and *RIMPAC*, which takes place every two years and involves multiple participants, especially the United States. In addition, India presents itself as an ally of countries in clear opposition to Chinese expansion in the area, such as the Philippines. New Delhi has always rejected the nine-point demarcation that China defends as justification for its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, contrary to the UN Arbitration Court's ruling as "useless cartographic expansionism"²⁶.

4.2 Common diplomacy

Not everything has been confrontation between China and India over time. Even today they share international forums such as the BRICS+, the G20 or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the doors have always remained open to dialogue between the two countries. It should be remembered that, in 1950, India was the first country outside the socialist bloc to establish diplomatic relations and recognise the People's Republic of China. In 1988, Rajiv Gandhi was the first prime minister to travel to China to improve the difficult relations after the Himalayan dispute that had erupted decades earlier. In 2003, India and China signed the Declaration on Principles for Comprehensive Relations and Cooperation and, two years later, the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity was signed. Both documents are the basis for ongoing bilateral agreements and also the platform for high-level relations between India and China. Since 2014,

²⁶ See: Chalk, P. Beijing's Aggression Behind Emerging India-Philippines Defence Relationship. *China Brief*. 23(18, subscribers' ed.), p. 7. [Accessed: 19 November 2024]. Available at: <https://connect.liblynx.com/wayf/67e11f1027bbdd92351147445834e008>

meetings between Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi have become commonplace, sometimes during official visits to either China or India, and especially in specific meetings on the margins of multi-lateral summits, such as the G20, the SCO or the BRICS+.

Thus, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Kazakhstan in 2017, the two countries signed the so-called Astana Consensus, according to which future differences between India and China should not turn into open disputes and result in the use of force, although a few years later violence broke out again in Aksai Chin. Since 2010, India and China have had more than thirty commissions and mechanisms for mutual dialogue on various issues, covering political, economic and cultural aspects, although it is true that these forums focus exclusively on those matters and less on regional one, and even more neglected are global issues²⁷. In another virtual SCO meeting in 2023, India publicly expressed its discomfort at the closer alliance and collaboration between China and Pakistan, evidencing that participation in the SCO itself is used by India as a rallying point and to improve its ties with Central Asian countries, while in the background it monitors Chinese influence in the region (Konwer, 2024).

5 Russia, near and far at the same time

Russia is a traditional ally and a historic pillar of India's foreign policy. This close bilateral relationship has been strong for more than 75 years, when the Soviet Union maintained privileged communication with the Indian National Congress Governments. Today it can be said that, although the two countries share a strong cultural, economic and security partnership, plus a similar vision of a new multipolar world, there are some indications that Modi's India does not share certain international postulates advocated by Russia, such as extreme anti-Westernism or the justifications used in the war in Ukraine²⁸.

It is true that in the last two years, precisely since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, bilateral trade has increased significantly, more than doubling the target of USD 30 billion in the trade balance,

²⁷ See: India-China Bilateral Brief. *India Ministry of External Affairs* [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Updated_21-August-2023.pdf

²⁸ See: Modi critica la invasión rusa de Ucrania tras reunirse con el presidente Putin. *Euronews*. [Accessed 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2024/07/09/modi-critica-la-invasion-rusa-de-ucrania-tras-reunirse-con-el-presidente-putin>

which was projected for 2025. Today those figures are close to USD 70 billion. Furthermore, both countries are in permanent communication to continue developing new models of cooperation²⁹. If from Russia there is an evident shift towards Asia and divorcing from Europe, India is taking advantage of this not only to gain better access to the Russian market for resources and technologies, but also to promote the Modi government's own flagship initiatives to activate its own industry, such as the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* projects, the phrase Modi used in his 2014 election campaign to define a self-sufficient India and to project the role of the country's industry abroad, or the *Make in India*, also from 2014, the government's initiative to encourage investment in Indian companies.

5.1 Indo-Russian relations in the 21st century

The Bilateral Investment Treaty signed between the two countries in 1994 —when Narasimha Rao was prime minister by the Indian National Congress— is automatically renewed, although it was revised in 2016 with Modi in power, stipulating that bilateral investments by Russian and Indian corporations should be treated at least as equally as with any third country, Russia opened the markets of the former Central Asian Soviet republics and any major disputes would be referred to the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) (India - Russian Federation BIT, 1994).

In October 2000, when Putin came to power, the two countries signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership, which provides for greater cooperation in different sectors. In 2010, this strategic partnership was upgraded to a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership, and joint bodies were created to monitor the activities involved in this cooperation, in particular the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission (IRIGC). In December 2021, the first 2+2 dialogue (foreign and defence ministers of both countries) was held and a commitment was made to establish an annual summit between the prime minister of India and the president of the Russian Federation, the last one between Modi and Putin being held on 8 and 9 July 2024 in Moscow, where various agreements and memorandums were signed (India's Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

²⁹ See: Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the India-Russia Business Forum, Mumbai. *India Ministry of External Affairs* [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38502/Address+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+at+the+IndiaRussia+Business+Forum+Mumbai>

Both Russia and India also focused on advancing three connectivity initiatives, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7200 km sea, rail and road network for freight transport between India, Iran and Russia, agreed in 2002; the Chennai-Vladivostok sea corridor that will reduce cargo transit time between the two ports to sixteen days and was operational as of last November³⁰, plus India's participation in the Northern Sea Route in Arctic waters, as in 2023 both countries agreed to train Indian seafarers in navigation in polar waters at the Russian Maritime Training Institute in Vladivostok³¹.

Last November at the India-Russia Business Forum in Mumbai and the India-Russia Inter-governmental Commission meeting in New Delhi, Minister Jaishankar put India-Russia bilateral trade at USD 100 billion by 2030, but repeatedly warned that the balance, heavily tilted in Russia's favour, needs urgent correction³². Bilateral transactions currently stand at USD 66 billion, up since the start of the Ukrainian war in February 2022, the best example being the energy sector, oil and gas, but also petrochemicals, railways and steel, while Indian investments in Russia are mainly concentrated in the pharmaceutical sector, where it calls for greater implementation, currently subject to certain tariff barriers and regulatory impediments from Moscow. Similarly, the success of the rupee-ruble trade agreement, which helps to avoid Western sanctions on Russia, would also depend in the future on the reduction of this trade deficit³³.

Since February 2022, however, the war in Ukraine has become a challenge to bilateral ties by highlighting certain rifts in political and diplomatic relations, evidenced by the different approaches

³⁰ See: Arya, A. Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor opens to boost India-Russia trade. *Economic Times*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://infra.economictimes.india-times.com/news/ports-shipping/chennai-vladivostok-maritime-corridor-opens-to-boost-india-russia-trade/115641794>

³¹ See: India and Russia explore Northern Sea Route (NSR), Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) in an effort to widen maritime cooperation. *India Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1957135>

³² See: India da un toque a Rusia y pide una corrección urgente de los negocios. *Huffington Post*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/india-da-toque-rusia-pide-correccion-urgente-negocios.html>

³³ Sen, A. India-Russia trade target of \$100 bn realistic but urgent need for balance: Jaishankar. *The Hindu Business Line*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/india-russia-trade-target-of-100-bn-realistic-but-urgent-need-for-balance-jaishankar/article68854888.ece>

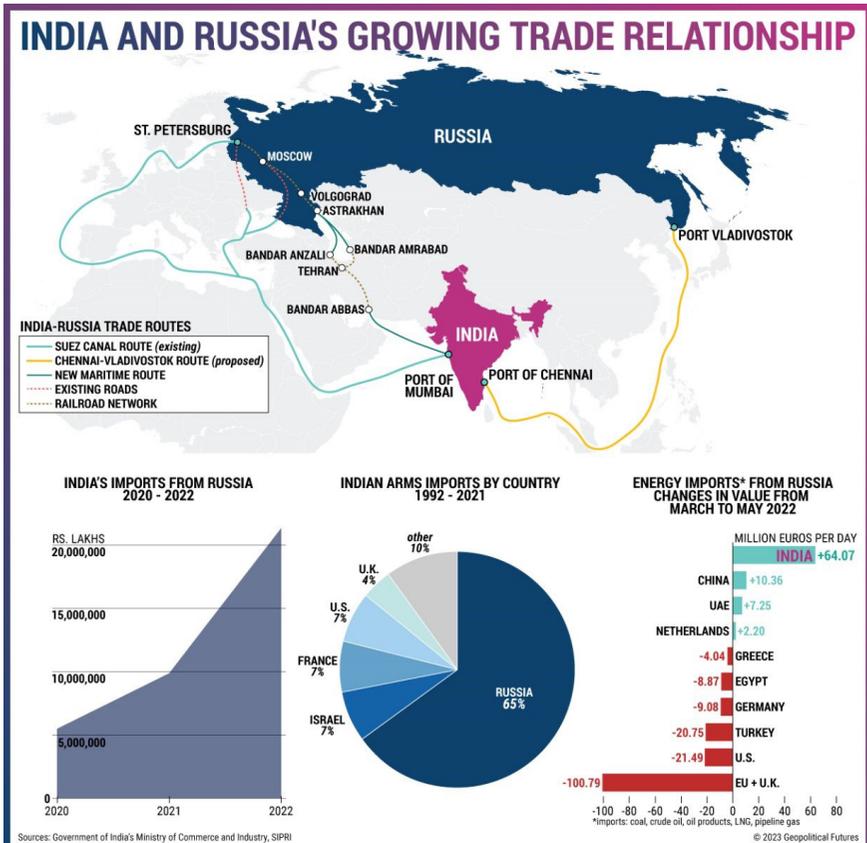


Figure 4: India-Russia economic relations and economic corridors (Source: HYPERLINK "<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/opportunities-and-risks-of-russia-india-trade/>" Opportunities and Risks of Russia-India Trade - Geopolitical Futures)

to both the war and the strategic partnership itself. Russia has been quick to cement the old friendship with India, while India has been more cautious, though still maintaining good relations, as evidenced also by record imports of Russian crude oil and other commodities, even in defiance of Western sanctions³⁴. But apart from this mutual collaboration in the energy market, which is beneficial to both countries, there is evidence that the common geopolitical understanding of the world order seems to be waning and, above all, the traditional cooperation in defence, which, although still important, also seems to be receding (Zakharov, 2024).

³⁴ Cadenas de Llano, A India justifica la compra de petróleo ruso: "Hemos salvado al mundo". *Huffington Post*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/india-justifica-compra-petroleo-ruso-hemos-salvado-mundobr.html>

5.2 Economic, defence and security cooperation

Russia is a major arms supplier to India and Western sanctions on Moscow in the wake of the invasion and Russia's own military needs hampered New Delhi's military equipment supply chain. However, India's military inventory still largely includes Russian-supplied equipment. Despite India's efforts to reduce this dependence, keeping alive a defence procurement relationship with Moscow is vital to maintaining the capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces. In May 2023, the Indian and Russian defence ministers agreed on a way for India to pay Moscow for military equipment despite sanctions, along with a plan for India to produce additional Russian equipment and spare parts locally (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

India has a historic defence cooperation with Russia, regulated through the aforementioned IRIGC and with contracts to supply India with the S-400 missile launcher system, manufactured under the same licence as the Soviet T-90 tanks, Su-30 MKI fighter aircraft, MiG-29 and Kamov helicopters, the modernisation of the former Soviet-era aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya*, the production of AK-203 rifles and BrahMos missiles³⁵. The case of these missiles is the most paradigmatic of the industrial merger of the Indo-Russian security sector. The product of a 2016 agreement between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya, the missile is named after the Brahmaputra and Moskva rivers and is renowned for its supersonic speed and accuracy. In 2022, India signed a USD 375 million deal with the Philippines to enhance the Pacific Island nation's defence capabilities. Last year, a first batch of these supersonic BrahMos cruise missiles arrived in Manila, marking an important milestone in India's defence export history³⁶.

Under a memorandum of understanding signed in Goa last November between Bharat Dynamics Limited and the Russian

³⁵ See: Dasgupta, V. Bad news for India, Russia-Ukraine war disrupts defence deal, S-400 delayed by 3 Years, Nuclear Submarine wait extended until... *india.com*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.india.com/news/world/india-russia-ukraine-war-pm-modi-vladimir-putin-disrupts-defense-deal-s-400-delayed-by-3-years-nuclear-submarine-wait-extended-until-7386883/>

³⁶ See: India delivers first batch of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines. *India NewsNetwork*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/es/20240420/india-delivers-first-batch-of-brahmos-supersonic-cruise-missiles-to-philippines>

export agency Rosoboronexport, within the framework of the Indian Army's requirements and according to the Indian Ministry of Defence tender of July 2023, new *Pantsir* self-propelled air defence missile systems were purchased to replace the obsolete 1360 Bofors in service also from the Soviet era³⁷. Military technical cooperation between the two countries is evolving from a transaction between a buyer country, India, and a seller country, Russia, to one involving Indian research, development and production of equipment and systems to modernise existing Russian equipment and systems.

Science and technology have also played a key role in the India-Russia bilateral partnership. In fact, India's only nuclear power plant established with technological assistance from a third country was Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu, built with Russian support. Bilateral cooperation in scientific and technological exchange is regulated in agreements made during the annual summit between Modi and Putin in New Delhi in December 2021.

India and Russia also share several international forums such as the United Nations where, as in the US case, Russia consistently expresses support for India's bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council, the G20, the BRICS+ and, most importantly in defence, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, although it is true that the alliance in this forum of China and Pakistan, secular enemies, plus a sense of remoteness from the Central Asian republics, means that India appears in this forum more as an observer. However, with Russia, joint military exercises are not uncommon, such as the INDRA exercise, which was last held in 2021, or the Vostok exercise held in September 2022 in Russia, although these manoeuvres involving Indian units are multinational, such as those carried out since 2019 in the Gulf of Oman between the Navies of India, Russia and Iran, another nearby power and an increasingly important player on the world geopolitical scene, manoeuvres in which China itself also participates on occasions, all of which symbolises India's international assertiveness³⁸.

³⁷ See: Mandal, S. India's Bharat Dynamics signs *Pantsir* agreement with Russia. *Janes*. [Accessed: 25 November 2024]. Available at: <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/weapons/indias-bharat-dynamics-signs-panstir-agreement-with-russia>

³⁸ See: Arora, S. (2021). India joins Iran-Russia's two-day navy exercise. In: *Current Affairs Adda247*. [Accessed: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/india-joins-iran-russias-two-day-navy-exercise/>

6 Conclusions: asymmetrical countries, similar leaderships

Is it possible to speak of India as a *peer* power close to the United States, China and Russia? It is difficult to answer in the affirmative, at least in the medium term. As Ana Ballesteros concluded in an apt definition, it is really an “indefinable power” that has been in constant transformation since the end of the last century (Ballesteros Peiró, 2024), which makes it difficult to clearly understand its role on the global stage, and uncertain even for those other great powers that must interact with it, some with a relationship as conflictive as that of China.

India’s evolution towards a position of greater international relevance is still a work in progress, and it does not seek to replicate foreign models or to align itself in a bloc defined as opposed to another, regardless of the powers that command them, be they the United States, China or Russia. As noted in the introduction, the *Indian imperative* means that the country sets its own pace, defines its own timing and content according to its own national interests and priorities, which may be shifting and even conflicting in a relatively short period of time. Achieving a longed-for strategic autonomy and asserting its position in the coming world order seems to be a priority objective.

India’s relations with the US over the past decade show how international friendships or belligerence are no longer static, but subject to constant variability depending on self-interest and common threats. India therefore needs allies like the United States and vice versa, building cooperation on multiple levels, the most important of which are commercial, economic and security-related, in order to achieve its ultimate goal of ascending to great power status. Other aspects, such as trade and the imposition of tariffs, may become a sticking point with India in a second Trump administration, which in its first term criticised India for unfair practices, calling it the ‘tariff queen’ and imposing its own tariffs on a variety of Indian products, but it is also a certainty that the US needs India in its policy of containment of China.

So, what kind of power is India today and how is this reflected in this choice of friends and their cooperation? What do India’s allies get in return? For the country, it is becoming increasingly difficult, within the current scenario of global uncertainty, to juggle through various strategic partnerships with countries that are in such opposing, if not diametrically opposed camps as the US, Iran, China and Russia. India’s growing strategic partnership with

the US, no longer consolidated but growing, may increasingly force the country to turn this alliance into an opposition to other actors, read Russia and China, although this is unlikely to be immediate.

Until very recently, both China and India were considered two rising global powers, but today China disputes the hegemonic primacy of the United States, while India, within a world dynamic that inexorably turns towards the Asia-Pacific, has become another determining geopolitical actor, even more at the regional than global level, without overlooking its importance in shaping the new world reality, whatever it may be. With respect to China, the question is perhaps whether this is a symmetrical or asymmetrical rivalry, given the differences in economic size and interdependence clearly in China's favour, and whether India will be able to pose more than an uncertain threat to China. Questions are also being raised on its relationship with Russia and the future trajectory of what has been a historically good rapport, something that will again be determined by its own strategic interests that at some point may no longer be aligned with Russia's, which is by no means the case at present, where Russia continues to present itself as a beneficial partner and reliable friend to India.

It is worth concluding with a reflection on a characteristic shared by the three great powers studied in relation to India. Along with the US, Russia and China share increasingly authoritarian and power-grabbing leadership models, whatever the political regimes, including democracies in the US, 'the world's oldest' and India, 'the world's largest'. Modi, Trump, Putin and Xi Jinping share some common characteristics, one of them being their intention to remain at the helm of their respective regimes for as long as they can as models of strong leadership, with no sign of them wanting to step down voluntarily. There is a certain nexus between the powers and speeches of the four leaders.

In both India and the United States there are alarm bells ringing about the regression in some essential points of democratic quality. The same can be said of Russia and China, where the political regime is one-party and political and socio-economic life is controlled by the all-powerful Communist Party, but beyond ideologies, decision-making is becoming more personalistic, although it is true that after the last elections in 2024, for example, Modi needs other support for his government programme. The four leaders employ an ideology where the unity of the country is understood within the mandate of the leader and his supporters,

excluding opposition groups and social or ethnic minorities, as is the case with the issue of immigration in the United States, the status of Caucasians and Central Asians in Russia, Uyghurs in China or Muslims in India itself.

At present, all four leaders set themselves up in their public speeches as the guarantors of the respective national identity, the country's external projection and that it is adequately heard in global politics, even observing the use of very similar rhetorical tools and narratives, each adapting their discourse to the social, political and cultural characteristics of their particular countries, which involves nationalism, a Manichean description of reality, populist slogans and mobilising the population where the use of the memory of history is one of the main arguments: ingratitude towards benevolent US hegemony after the Cold War, continued Western aggression in the case of Russia, a traumatic colonial past in India—even dating back to the time of the Muslim Mughal Empire, equipped for later British rule—and a combination of all three in China: undervaluation of a millenary civilisation, Western aggression and unjust war, at least commercially, from the United States.

There is another factor to take into account, and that is that in international forums, multilateral summits or bilateral meetings, the weight of Trump, Putin, Modi or Xi Jinping, which responds to the weight of their countries, but also to more than a decade governing their destinies or intervening in national politics in the case of Trump, makes them charismatic. This is a contrast to the lack of equally charismatic leaderships in Europe, which is an advantage when it comes to negotiating, although it also makes it possible to strike a balance between all of them, since in the forums where they coincide, none of them want to appear publicly inferior or, to put it better, make concessions to the others, which may later be criticised in their countries and have repercussions on the leadership of each of them. For this reason, public disagreements are not uncommon in some of their meetings, as Modi himself has demonstrated with respect to Putin and Xi Jinping.

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CHAPTER THREE

Relaunching the India-Europe relationship: key players and sectors in the Modi era

Amaia Sánchez-Cacicedo

Abstract

Since Modi came to power in 2014, India has sought to engage with new geographies in order to ensure its national security and economic growth. This vision has led India to further relations with European capitals beyond Paris and Berlin. On the European side, there is a consensus that it wants to elevate its bilateral engagement with India to a more geostrategic level, partly in response to the China factor, as well as India's enhanced global position. The transition in the world order is pushing Europe to be much more pragmatic and to follow a path that is increasingly alienated from India's *multialignment*. This is a particularly favourable moment to elevate the convergence of interests between Europe and India to include trade, green transition, digital transition and critical technologies on the agenda. The current potential of the bilateral relationship between India and Europe, including Spain, must be harnessed.

Keywords

India, Europe, Subregions of Europe, Geostrategic, Potential.

1 Introduction

The current geopolitical climate is framed by a fragmented world order, more multipolar in the emerging global balance of power and yet at risk of succumbing to a growing bipolarity between the US and China. In the face of such developments, both India and the European powers are seeking a third way. This has led India and Europe to pursue closer cooperation in areas of greater strategic importance.

Since Modi came to power in 2014, India has sought a new engagement with different geographies in order to ensure its national security as well as its economic growth. This new vision has had an effect on India's relationship with various European capitals, including Brussels, but also new players in other European subregions. For their part, there is a palpable consensus among European countries, as well as the EU as a whole, that they want to elevate their bilateral engagement with India to a more geostrategic level, partly in response to the China factor, as well as India's improved global position.

The current evolution of ties between India and European actors continues to have a strong commercial character combined with stronger technological cooperation, both in the fields of green technology, biotechnology, digital, security and defence. This evolution breaks with decades of a bilateral relationship in which the commercial emphasis has predominated, although it remains a key pillar of the relationship. Moreover, the issue of encouraging greater mobility of skilled legal immigration from India to European countries is becoming increasingly relevant, given the shortage of qualified personnel in certain sectors such as technology, among others.

The first part of the chapter discusses Europe's role in India's geostrategic chessboard from the first Modi government in 2014 onwards. Subsequently, it elaborates on the evolution of India's relationship with key European actors from India's perspective, starting with the EU as a whole, briefly mentioning the countries with the most weight within the Union —France and Germany; there is already a comprehensive focus on India-France and India-Germany relations.

This is why more emphasis is placed here on the evolution of the bilateral relationship with other European actors —such as the UK post-Brexit— in addition to the so-called European subregions

with which India seeks closer ties. The aim is to deepen the relationship between India and other actors with less relevance at present, but with more potential to explore. Finally, the positive evolution of the bilateral relationship between Spain and India is highlighted, framed in the Mediterranean region according to India's current cartographic imaginary.

It concludes by highlighting those key sectors and areas where there is the greatest potential to be exploited based on the current priorities of the Indian government, as well as those of the main European players, including the EU.

2 Europe's role in India's geostrategic chessboard in the Modi era

India has positioned itself as a major swing state in the world, implementing a strategy called *minilateralism*¹ (Sánchez-Cacicedo, 2023). India's foreign policy is markedly pragmatic and guided by the country's interests in the different spheres. India aims to become a leading power in the world. For India, foreign policy is a vehicle for achieving a higher level of economic development and security for the country, thus enabling it to achieve its goal of becoming a developed economy by 2047 —*Viksit Bharat Vision @2047*²— within the framework of its current Elixir Age — *Amrit Kaal*.

The current Indian foreign minister, S. Jaishankar (2024: 106) refers to India's need for a 'multivectoral' foreign policy that seeks to maximise its outcomes and benefits. This idea is rooted in the tradition of Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of non-alienation or what is now called *multialienation* with more proactive and utilitarian overtones. Simultaneously, with the arrival of Modi, India has sought to position itself as a teacher of the world —*vishwaguru*— with a unique mission, including that of disseminating its historical legacy and the wisdom attached to its civilisation (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014). Such a narrative was particularly evident during India's chairmanship of the Group of 20 (G20) in 2023. Under the slogan of 'One land, one family, one future' —'*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'— originating from the Hindu sacred scriptures, written in Sanskrit, the Modi government sought to

¹ According to Naim (2009), minilateralism is characterised by "bringing to the table the fewest number of countries necessary to obtain the greatest possible impact in resolving a particular interest".

² See: *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

send a message to international leaders of the importance of the civilisational legacy of Bharat (Sanskrit for India) in its new foreign policy. India seeks to frame its global position within Western values of democratisation and respect for the rule of law while appealing to its leadership capacity in the Global South.

It should not be forgotten that India suffers from the “tyranny of geography” (Chellaney, 2025). Its neighbouring region is in a particularly turbulent phase given the devastating economic crisis in Sri Lanka in 2022, the fall of Prime Minister Hasina’s government in Bangladesh last autumn, and the protracted situation of armed conflict and governmental power vacuum in Myanmar. It is a troubled region, within which its neighbours are swinging between their historic support for India and their growing shared interests with China. For India, the direct Chinese threat is very tangible considering that they share a land border of almost 3500 km (Ministry of Home Affairs India, 2017), having had an official war with the neighbouring country in 1962 and coming to a military stand-off again in 1967. More recently there have been armed clashes on the Chinese-Indian border in 2017 and 2020 (Madan, 2025). Tensions remain high with the neighbouring country, despite the mutual intention to stabilise ties following the partial withdrawal of both sides from the Line of Actual Control in October 2024 (Lidarev, 2025).

Moreover, China’s influence now extends beyond the military, permeating the economic and technological spheres. As part of this desire to reduce India’s dependence on China, India has sought to establish closer ties with other powers such as Australia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States (US), Israel, the UK and the EU (Madan, 2025). The same need also exists on the part of India’s traditional great powers and other emerging countries, current and potential partners. However, India perceives the EU and some of its main European partners as excessively lax in their *de-risking* policy towards China, immune to the imminent threat it poses to India. This has not been the case for the US: India perceives the US approach to China as firm, positioned in its *de-coupling* stance towards China. It remains to be seen in which direction the new Trump administration’s policy towards China will evolve.

If the new US administration’s intention to pursue an isolationist agenda is confirmed, other powers can be expected to take a more proactive role in their engagement with India and the Indo-Pacific as a whole (Xavier, 2025). Hence, collaboration with

India has the potential to deepen and endure significantly in the medium to long term.

Both India and its European partners are pursuing greater strategic autonomy³, which is now linked to ensuring economic security and greater resilience, both economically, in terms of energy security and defence. While the EU seeks to ensure its economic security through “strategic interdependence”⁴, India does so through “multi- or pluralialienation” in order to become self-sufficient —*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*—⁵. Whichever term is used, both India and the EU seek to become an influential pole in the evolution of the current world order: for the EU it would mean not losing its relevance as a strategic bloc, while for India it would mean becoming a leading power.

The great challenge facing both India and its European partners is to retain their sovereignty as they seek to increase their material power, both economically and in terms of security. The EU has the added challenge of being seen as an actor with a coherent and collective vision rather than a fragmented entity given the different interests of its member states. In the quest to ensure its survival and the potential third way mentioned above, both India and the European powers have realised the need to strengthen their relations with other Indo-Pacific middle powers as a counterweight to China and the US.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been an obstacle in relations between the European powers and India. India harbours no doubts that it needs China on its side to counter the growing Chinese-Russian alliance. India wants to reduce Russia’s economic and technological dependence on China. Indeed, India has never publicly condemned Russian actions, nor has it supported UN resolutions on Ukraine/Russia, abstaining on all votes since

³ For the EU, the concept of strategic autonomy has evolved from the idea of achieving greater independence in the security and defence domains to taking on a more geopolitical connotation in an increasingly hostile environment. See: European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). For India, the notion of strategic autonomy means that on core issues - national security, global trade, climate change - India will cooperate with all those with whom it can, purely with its interests in mind. India will be careful to partner with the great powers rather than take sides with them. See: Menon, S. (2021).

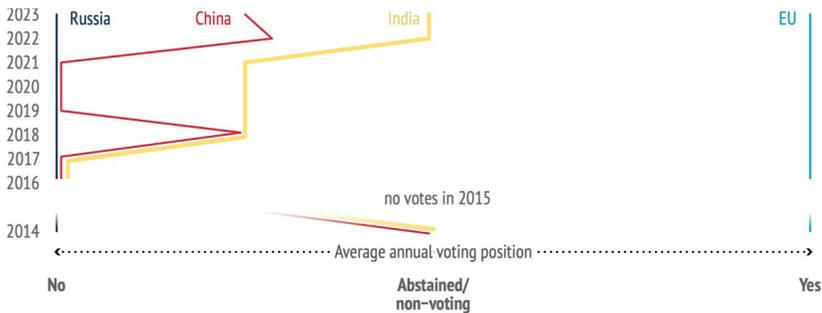
⁴ Strategic interdependence in this chapter is based on the premise of the need to ensure the sovereignty of each actor while participating in a fluid network of partners and coalitions focused on shared interests, rather than on an ideological or value-based approach. See: Aydintasbas, A. *et al.* (2023).

⁵ See: *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* Abhiyan.

March 2022 (Mukherjee 2024:15). Even more significant is the fact that this behaviour on the part of India has had no material consequences for the EU-India bilateral relationship, despite the fact that Russia currently constitutes one of the biggest security threats to the EU.

Shifts in UN voting patterns on Ukraine

Divergent voting behaviour by India and the EU on Ukraine. India diverges from Russia and China post-2022



Data: UN Digital Library, 2024

In addition, India has maintained its strong trade relationship with Russia both in terms of oil and gas imports and imports of Russian-made weaponry. The percentage of crude oil imported by India from Russia amounted to 40% of the total between April and October 2024, surpassing the amount imported from Iraq —its main exporter during 2023— given the reduced price offered by Russia India (The Economist, 2025). Not surprisingly, India and Russia agreed the largest energy deal between the two countries to the tune of thirteen trillion US dollars last December (Bose and Briancon, 2024). In terms of arms transfers, Russia is the largest arms exporter to India, followed closely by France in the period 2019-2023 (Wezeman *et al.*, 2024).

However, the Russian-Indian relationship has a growing geo-economic component that goes beyond India's interest in Russian raw materials or defence. This includes North Sea trade routes through the Arctic, the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor as an alternative to the International Transport Corridor North South (CITNS), as well as the Russian Far East. Both countries share an interest in investing in agriculture, biotechnology, energy (including nuclear), mining, labour and shipping. Russia also intends to pursue joint projects with the Indians in the construction of nuclear power plants in Bangladesh, for example, or missiles in Vietnam and the Philippines (Sánchez-Cacicedo, 2024).

3 Key European players from 2014 to the present day

Based on the geostrategic scenario outlined above, there has been a relaunch of the India-EU relationship from 2021/2022. This date coincides with the Portuguese presidency of the European Council during the first half of 2021 and the subsequent visit of the then president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to India in April 2022. This revival has also occurred with certain European subregions such as the Nordic countries, Central and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, as well as countries with traditionally lesser relations with India, such as Spain.

This section will begin by addressing the evolution of the India-EU relationship, moving on to the relationship with the UK and concluding with the new key European subregions in India's new foreign policy vision in the Modi era.

3.1 European Union

Three decades after the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and the EU in 2004, the relationship is now at a new crossroads. The EU-India Strategic Partnership: Roadmap 2025 of 2020 is due for renewal this year, with the development of an EU-India strategic agenda prioritised according to the EU's policy needs for the period 2024-2029 (European Union, 2024). This Roadmap 2025 already signified a broadening of the agenda between the two actors beyond trade, including issues such as sustainability, human rights and multilateralism. Subsequently, cooperation evolved towards issues of connectivity, global health, the environment and human rights, as well as coordination on regional security, including a Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, reform of the UN Security Council, and cooperation at the agency level. It also called for cooperation at the level of investigation agencies.

One of the cornerstones of the EU-India relationship has been the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) whose negotiations began in 2007, having been relaunched in 2022. Reaching a final agreement is being resisted on the basis of differing approaches to the depth and range of the agreement, having managed, however, to finalise an Agreement on Investment Protection and Geographical Indications.

Following the February 2025 meeting between European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen together with the

College of Commissioners and Prime Minister Modi in New Delhi, the end of 2025 has been set as the deadline for finalising the FTA (European Commission, 2025a). A very ambitious and not very realistic target.

It is worth noting that the EU has been India's top trading partner in goods (12.2% of India's total trade balance), ahead of the US (10.8%) and China (10.5%) in 2023 (European Commission, 2024). The EU is also the second largest destination for Indian exports (17.5% of the total) after the USA (17.6%), while China is fourth in 2023 (3.7%). India is the EU's ninth largest trading partner (2.2% of the trade balance) in goods in 2023, far behind the US (16.7%), China (14.6%) or the UK (10.1%). Even so, the trade relationship in goods has increased by 90% in the last decade, indicating a positive trajectory with the world's fifth largest economy and the world's most populous country. The EU is a leading investor in India (EUR108.3 bn) in 2022, although far behind China (EUR 247.5 bn) or Brazil (EUR 293.4 bn) (*Ibid.*).

Beyond the purely commercial relationship, under the Portuguese EU Presidency, the EU-India Connectivity Partnership was signed in May 2021, which included the digital, transport and energy sectors, as well as the flow of people, goods, services, data and capital. It also includes cooperation on regulations, standards and physical projects. It eventually seeks to incentivise public-private investments, including from the European Investment Bank (EIB), as well as institutions from member states and India.

In line with the growing importance of the geopolitics of technology for the foreign policy of both actors, there has been a clear increase in the technology aspect of the relationship, specifically in critical and emerging technologies, as well as in green technology. The creation of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2022 is indicative of this significant evolution. The first meeting of the TTC took place in May 2023, and the second, this past February in New Delhi. There are three working groups within the TTC that delineate specific lines of collaboration (Indian Ministry of External Affairs-MEA, 2023):

- Working Group 1. Strategic technologies, digital governance and connectivity:
 - Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on semiconductors signed in September 2023 to promote the exchange of information on subsidies, potential disruptions and R&D in this sector.

- Joint cooperation in public digital infrastructure for third countries given the successful development of digital identity in India (through Aadhaar)⁶, which has enabled greater digital and financial inclusion of more than 1.3 billion Indians.
- Cooperation on digital platforms, data governance and telecommunications regulation linked to AI platforms, 5G/6G (interoperable standards) and quantum computing, as opposed to focusing solely on cybersecurity and Internet governance issues.
- Working Group 2. Green Technology and Clean Energy:
 - Cooperation on clean energy, with an emphasis on renewable and low-carbon hydrogen.
 - Cooperation on electric mobility, including aspects of the circularity of batteries for electric cars and the recovery of raw materials.
 - Cooperation on standards to ensure interoperability, including in the green hydrogen sector.
- Working Group 3. Trade, investment and resilient value chains:
 - Cooperation in resilient value chains: agreeing on basic standards of cooperation, as well as identifying value chains of mutual interest.
 - Cooperation on market access: identifying and resolving existing trade barriers.
 - Cooperation in the exchange of information on investment screening mechanisms (ISM): to achieve a better understanding of each other's ISM regime.
 - Cooperation on multilateral trade issues: collaborate in view of future meetings at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) level, as well as on the implementation of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

The TTC has re-emerged following the recent high-level meeting between Ursula von der Leyen, the College of Commissioners and Prime Minister Modi in which progress was made in the areas of Artificial Intelligence, 6G technologies and green hydrogen. In addition, there was a rapprochement towards a potential Security and Defence Partnership (European Commission, 2025b).

⁶ For a better understanding, see the Unique Identification Authority of India. See: UIDAI.

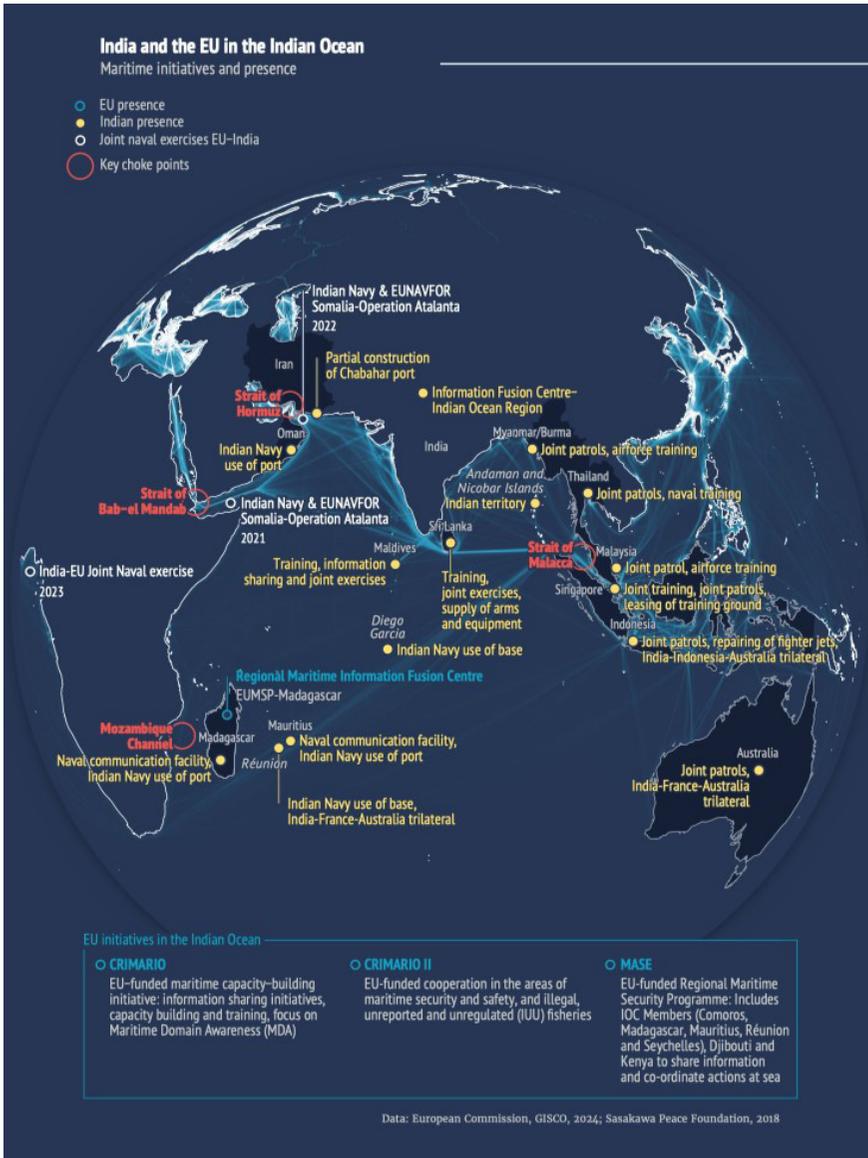
A meeting of the EU-India Energy Panel linked to the EU-India Clean Energy and Climate Partnership (MEA India, 2024a) was already held in November 2024.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the EU-India Strategic Partnership, members of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) met in Brussels this past November for consultations. The focus of the discussions was broad with an emphasis on economic security, green transition, security and defence, migration, mobility, the Connectivity Partnership, the Global Gateway and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) (EEAS, 2024).

The current relation between the two actors is favourable but also uncertain, given President Trump's rise to power and global volatility. Both actors need to recognise their vulnerabilities: for India, China is currently the biggest threat, while Russia is the biggest threat to the EU, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There is a clear desire and need to advance the depth of the EU-India relationship in a convulsive geopolitical and geo-economic context. The recent bilateral meeting at the highest level between the EU and the Indian government has evidenced the mutual interest in deepening a deeper and more strategic relationship. The bilateral meetings planned for this year are most welcome and will serve to shed light on the evolving EU-India relationship.

There is also a mutual interest in investing in security and defence sectors. Not surprisingly, France is India's third largest arms exporter after Israel and Russia (Wezeman *et al.*, 2024). Mutual interest in this area has evolved over time, despite India's historical perception of conceptualising European security through the prism of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This perception remains. However, the launch of the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in 2022, combined with the EU's need to support Ukraine unilaterally against the Russian invasion, is progressively changing this impression. India has also expressed interest in producing defence equipment jointly, as it is already doing with the US and France.

In addition, India has been keen to participate in projects within the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PSC) framework, which is limited to member states or third countries that are NATO members or have an information security agreement with the EU; this is not yet the case for India although it has already been considered (Blarel, 2024:39). There is also some scepti-



cism on the EU side about possible dual-use technology transfer to India, given its close relationship with Russia in defence and other matters.

In contrast, there is a mutual interest in developing maritime security cooperation, particularly in the area of *maritime domain awareness* (MDA). Both the EU and India have become increasingly active in this area, particularly in the Western Indian Ocean,

in reaction to Chinese penetration of India's sphere of influence and that of other regional actors. The EU launched EUNAVFOR ATALANTA (2008), CRIMARIO I (2014) and II (2020) (Indo-Pacific Critical Paths) and, more recently, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (2024). In addition, it has established the *Maritime Security Centre Indian Ocean (MSCIO)* to monitor EUNAVFOR's missions in the region and global trade routes through the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean.

As a sign of India's welcome for the EU's growing interest in the Indian Ocean, the Union has recently been accepted as a Dialogue Partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). In addition, the EU has more recently joined the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) (European Commission, 2025a). It is worth mentioning that France was already a member of IOR-ARC, while Germany, Italy and the UK were already dialogue partners. Berlin is showing increasing interest in its engagement in the Indo-Pacific; Germany launched in October 2024 its new India-focused strategy —*focus on India* (The Federal Government Germany, 2024). India, for its part, is looking for extraterritorial partners beyond the US to support its role as a guarantor of Indian Ocean security against the Chinese threat to the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

The areas of work and study permits, as well as issues of legal, skilled migration from India, are of growing interest to India and Brussels.

3.2 United Kingdom

The UK-India relationship has evolved substantially since Modi came to power in 2014. Ties had stagnated due to the UK-India bilateral relationship being linked to the Pakistani factor in relation to the British presence in Afghanistan via NATO. Moreover, the UK has been losing influence and strategic power to other European countries, such as France, which have been able to gain ground in the maritime and defence domains. Germany is also gaining ground, as shown by a potential agreement on joint logistical support with the Indian Armed Forces to ensure the German military's presence in the Indo-Pacific (The Federal Government Germany, 2024).

However, it should not be forgotten that the UK has a diaspora of 1.9 million British citizens of Indian origin known as a *living*

bridge (Bajpae, 2024), as epitomised by Rishi Sunak, the recent prime minister of the UK between October 2022 and July 2024. In fact, reaching an agreement on the mobility of people with an emphasis on qualified legal migration is another pending issue between the two countries.

Moreover, the UK's exit from the EU in 2020 has given it independence from the EU in its trade policy vis-à-vis third countries, including India. This has eventually led to the UK being able to deepen the historical link between the two countries in a more strategic way, incorporating the areas of security and defence, climate change and clean energy, as well as health and the trade dimension, as set out in the Roadmap 2030 for India-UK relations (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office - United Kingdom, 2021).

Following the coming to power of the current Labour government led by Keir Starmer in July 2024, trade negotiations for an FTA have been relaunched. This is seen as key for both countries, given that India is the second largest foreign investor in the UK, while Indian exports to the UK are six times more than exports to Russia (Bajpae 2024). Achieving an India-UK FTA could put pressure on the EU to finalise its own negotiations for an EU-India FTA.

In addition, the new British government seeks to deepen cooperation in areas such as climate change, education, security and technology (Prime Minister's Office - United Kingdom, 2024). It is also worth highlighting the areas of maritime security and technology, given their current geostrategic importance not only for the link between these two countries, but also at the global level.

Given the UK's historical presence in the Western Indian Ocean, namely in Chagos (Mauritius)⁷, there is a desire on the part of both actors for closer cooperation, which could include triangulation with African countries bordering the Indian Ocean (Alden and Schoeman, 2022). There are several growing risks linked to piracy, maritime terrorism, as well as the violation of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of countries in the region by major powers, including China.

Following the example of the India-US relationship, the UK and India launched the Technology Security Initiative in July 2024 to

⁷ In October 2024 the UK and Mauritian governments announced an agreement that would return sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius under a 200-year *lease* agreement. The agreement also includes the atoll of Diego Garcia, where a US military base is located, which could make implementation of the agreement difficult.

increase their collaboration on critical and emerging technologies (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office - United Kingdom, 2024). In addition, with the arrival of Prime Minister Starmer, the UK has launched a Blueprint for Change that integrates a key technology part based on Cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in order to reinvigorate the UK's role in the world, as well as re-launching alliances and partnerships. Given India's role in new technologies and the availability of skilled personnel, combined with the UK's skills shortage, there is a clear symbiosis here (Bajpae 2024). The UK ranks fourth in the global AI Index while India ranks tenth, ahead of a large number of European countries, including Spain⁸.

3.3 Spain and subregions of Europe

In addition to the emphasis on the EU, Modi's India has shown a specific interest in fostering ties with different subregions of Europe, beyond the traditionally leading post-Brexit EU countries, Germany and France. The current Indian foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, directly alludes to such subregions of interest in his book *Why Bharat Matters*, highlighting the following: the Mediterranean region; the Nordic region; the Central and Eastern European region; as well as the Baltic region and the Caucasus (Jaishankar 2024: 99). The focus on the Mediterranean region has obvious significance for Spain and for its bilateral relationship with India.

3.3.1 India-Nordic countries relationship

Before delving into the new relevance of the Mediterranean region, I would like to explain the importance of other European subregions. In the case of the Nordic countries —Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway— there have been two official bilateral forums between India and the Nordic countries in 2018 and 2022; in between, more informal dialogues have taken place, as with the EU. According to Henrik Chetan Aspengren, senior analyst and leader of the Indo-Nordic Relations Project at the Swedish Institute for International Relations (UI), the Nordic countries that historically lead the bilateral relationship with India have been Sweden and Denmark, although the Economic and

⁸ See: Tortoise, <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/intelligence/global-ai>

Trade Partnership Agreement between India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) is shifting the balance in favour of Norway⁹. However, Denmark was one of the three countries chosen by Modi for his 2022 European tour, along with France and Germany, following the Danish prime minister's visit the previous year (Denmark in India, 2022).

Overall, the Nordic countries wish to increase their cooperation with India by prioritising integration in value chains, as well as the opportunities that the large Indian market offers to Nordic corporations. There is also a desire for political cooperation in handling global challenges together, although there is some raise the relationship to a more strategic level given Russia's close ties with India. According to Aspengren, there is a particular apprehension in security and defence linked to the potential dual use of technologies, especially in the context of the Nordic public perception of India's growing closeness to Russia. Even so, the Nordic defence industry remains active in this regard and, so far, there has been no hint of downgrading the relationship with India, although this could be to its detriment in the medium-long term¹⁰.

The main converging interest is in green technologies, clean energy and energy diversification (Bhattacharya 2022). However, the agenda is broader. Aspengren highlights how India sees the Nordic countries as an opportunity for investment, technology and trade cooperation, as well as the potential to optimise local employment and talent. More collaboration is likely to be seen in the future in the areas of maritime security, common goods, as well as in the space sector¹¹. It should not be forgotten that the Nordic countries are key to India's Arctic policy, just as India is crucial for the potential recruitment of skilled labour in the Nordic countries, given their shortage.

3.3.2 India-Central and Eastern Europe relationship

The attractiveness of Central and Eastern Europe for India has a geostrategic component, as it is a gateway for Indian exports to Europe. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India has also understood the region's role as a buffer between Russia and

⁹ Interview conducted by the author via email, 22 January 2025.

¹⁰ Interview conducted by the author via email, 22 January 2025.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

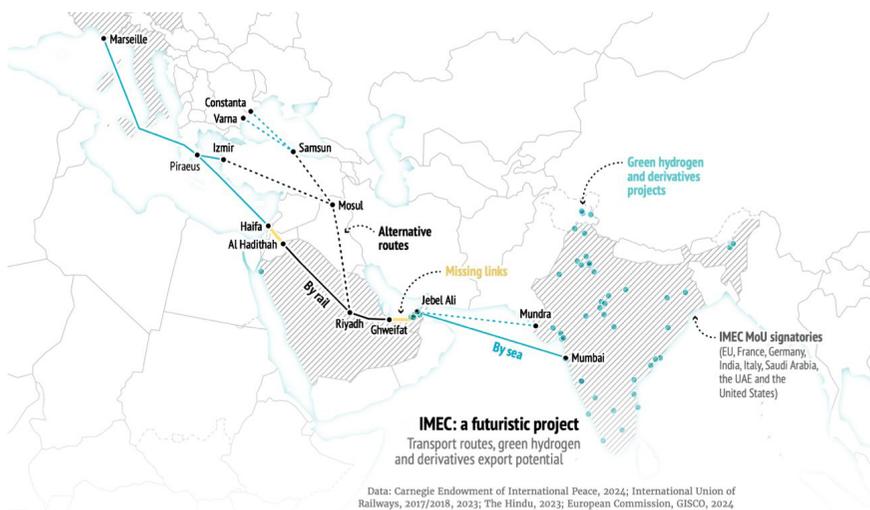
Western Europe. However, there are clear divergences in the nature of the relationship with Russia in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not surprisingly, Modi visited Kyiv in August 2024 in order to balance the widespread perception of his indiscriminate support for Russia—including financially—following his warm greeting to President Putin on his official bilateral visit to Moscow in July 2024. The fact that President Zelenskyy proposed India as the host country for a second Ukraine peace summit points to India's tilting power, which was initially referred to. It is also worth noting that while Russia was the top arms supplier to India between 2019-2023, India was the third largest recipient of arms from Ukraine behind China and Saudi Arabia (Wezeman *et al.*, 2024).

Poland and the Czech Republic lead the region in ties with India, with both countries having a historic relationship with India. Poland celebrated, in 2024, seventy years since the establishment of relations, dating back to the year of India's independence in the case of the Czech Republic. Poland is the largest economy in the region, as well as India's largest regional trading partner (MEA India, 2024b). Modi's visit to Poland last year served to conclude a strategic partnership, as well as a five-year cooperation plan, signalling a mutual desire to deepen the relationship in the fields of renewable energy, information technology and space exploration (Kugiel, 2024a). India has also signed an innovation partnership with the Czech Republic in 2024, which was sealed with the visit of the Czech prime minister to India early last year (Embassy of the Czech Republic in New Delhi, 2024).

On the other hand, India is aware of China's attempted penetration of the region through the 16+1 Initiative launched by China in 2012 (Grieger, 2018) combined with the subsequent Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the Baltic States. Greece would later join the initiative, giving rise to 17+1. However, it eventually lost relevance with Lithuania's exit and the cooling of EU-China relations after the European Commission labelled China a "strategic competitor" in 2019 (European Commission 2019). Thereafter, the EU began to take a more hostile stance towards China, which would lead it to call it a "systemic rival". Such an evolution has been viewed favourably by India, which has interpreted China's 17+1 Initiative as yet another attempt to gain global influence, as well as to pursue a 'divide and rule' strategy vis-à-vis EU member states.

3.3.3 India-Mediterranean relationship

The third sub-region worth highlighting is the Mediterranean region, within which India is seeking to strengthen ties with Italy and Greece, as well as Spain. Not surprisingly, the last two guests of honour at the well-known Raisina Dialogue forum —organised annually by the *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)* in India— have been Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and Greek Prime Minister Kyriákos Mitsotákis in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Moreover, it is worth noting that both Greece and Italy play a key role in the future deployment of the IMEC that will link India with Southern Europe via the Middle East, more specifically, the ports of Mumbai and Mundra with the port of Piraeus in Greece, passing through Jebel Ali (United Arab Emirates) and Haifa (Israel) (Ghanem and Sánchez-Cacicedo, 2024).



There has been a revitalisation of India-Italy ties in recent years. Both countries are keen to enhance their strategic partnership as evidenced by their new Joint Strategic Action Plan 2025-2029, which they agreed during the last G20 meeting in Brazil in November 2024. This strategy outlines very strategic areas of cooperation, beyond sustainable mobility, food processing, agricultural products, machinery and pharmaceuticals. Of particular note is the specific mention of the IMEC, as well as critical and emerging technologies, the space sector, energy transition, as well as cooperation on maritime security. Italy and India have

also signed a Strategic Partnership on Energy Transition specifically. They also highlight cooperation on irregular migration, as well as on people mobility linked to educational and cultural exchanges (MEA India, 2024c).

There are many parallels between recent developments in the relationship between Italy and India and that between Greece and India. Greece and India have also signed a strategic partnership, with visits having taken place at the highest political level starting with Prime Minister Modi's official visit in 2023, followed by Prime Minister Mitsotakis the following year. This reflects the clear mutual interest in deepening the relationship, taking into account the potential of the Indian market in the eyes of the Greek government, as well as Greece's strategic location as a gateway to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Cooperation in this case is not merely commercial in nature either but is taking on more geostrategic overtones. They highlight the IMEC as a key hub for connectivity between India and Europe, as well as enabling Indian investment in Greece linked to ports, logistics, maritime transport and supply chains. They also highlight the introduction of the Indian *unified payments interface* (UPI) into the Greek financial system to facilitate the transfer of money between the two countries. The geostrategic component is implicit in the interest to cooperate in the space and science sectors —nanotechnology, biotechnology and clean technologies—. They also highlight the great potential for collaboration in the provision of digital governance services, telemedicine and digital education through new critical technologies (MEA India, 2024d).

3.3.4 Relationship with Spain

As in the case of Italy and Greece, there is a clear mutual interest in raising the relationship between Spain and India to a more strategic level, as well as seeking to achieve greater commercial significance for both countries. President Sánchez's official visit to India in late 2024, the first visit by a Spanish prime minister to the country in eighteen years, has been a major boost to both countries' desire to renew bilateral relations. It is worth noting that Prime Minister Modi visited Spain in 2017 and, very recently, so did the current Indian foreign minister, S. Jaishankar.

During his visit to Spain earlier this year, Jaishankar highlighted Spain's growing importance to India based on its membership

of the Mediterranean region, as a EU member state, as well as being linked to its Ibero-American facet. Spain is a major investor in Ibero-America with a substantial presence of leading Spanish companies in the region. In terms of sectoral interests, the automotive sector, food processing, green technology and defence (Spain-India Dialogue, 2024) stand out.

The recent inauguration of the new C-295 aircraft final assembly plant for the Indian Air Force was a milestone in the bilateral relationship. It is also the first locally manufactured C-295 aircraft, the result of the *Make in India* initiative, which symbolises the interest of both countries in cooperating in technology transfer (La Moncloa, 2024). This phenomenon has also occurred with the joint manufacture of the Lanza 3D radar for naval use. In addition, future collaborations are being considered for the joint manufacture of submarines (Alvear-Garijo, 2023). This mutual interest in the security sector extends to the field of cybersecurity.

There is also a desire to cooperate at the economic level, given India's great commercial potential, as well as at the level of education, cultural exchange, tourism and people-to-people ties. Moreover, there is a very substantial interest on the part of India in promoting Spanish language learning in India, as it is seen as an asset for the country's global vision, as well as for its access to the Ibero- American and US markets, eventually (Alvear-Garbijo, 2023). Following the launch of India's New Education Policy (NEP) in 2020, Spanish language has been officially introduced in the public education system to encourage its learning (*Ibid.*).

Finally, during his recent visit to Spain, Jaishankar highlighted the concept of the *Global Workplace* linked to the technological area, in which the training of qualified labour and the mobility of talent between the two countries could be strongly promoted. According to the Indian foreign minister himself, Spain should make it easier to grant visas to Indian citizens, as it is currently one of the EU countries that poses the most obstacles in this regard (Spain-India Dialogue, 2025). This undoubtedly hinders closer ties between the two peoples, as well as limiting the great potential of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

4 Untapped potential

Both Europe and India have much to gain from working on the third way towards a somewhat more orderly multipolarity that they both seek. It should be borne in mind that a convulsive tran-

sition of the world order is currently underway. With President Trump's return to power, consolidating a geopolitical survival strategy becomes an imperative, given the expected exacerbation of the trend towards bipolarity fostered by the US and China.

It will be key for the future of the relationship between Europe and India to further deepen a geostrategic approach that includes critical and emerging technologies, being prepared to negotiate regulations and standards in the digital, critical technology and green technology fields. The Modi government is deploying a clear strategy of fostering different strategic partnerships with different European countries, for example, on innovation with the Czech Republic, on water with the Netherlands or on energy transition with Italy (Kugiel, 2024b). The breakthroughs achieved between the Biden administration and the Modi government in the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET), concluded in 2023, could serve as a model for Europe to follow. The existence of the EU-India TTC is a major step that needs to be capitalised on in the coming years in order to achieve greater competitiveness on both sides, including in fostering connectivity in the Indo-Pacific.

It is worth noting that the Indo-Pacific is the main trade transit route between Europe and Asia via the Middle East. This is also where the main key sea lanes for the flow of raw materials (including oil and gas, fertilisers, food) and some of the key choke points, such as the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, are located. The deployment of the EU's Global Gateway and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) demonstrate the strategic importance of connectivity.

In addition, there is a clear emphasis on fostering joint maritime security cooperation between the EU and India, as well as between some member states and India. France undoubtedly leads the way given its historical physical presence as the resident power in the Indian Ocean. However, other European countries, such as Germany, Spain, Greece and Italy, are seeking to gain more importance in this area.

Finally, the need to improve the mobility of students as well as skilled labour is of vital importance to the India-Europe relationship. The visa regime needs to be eased to allow more movement of skilled workers in sectors with shortages. This has been the case in the semiconductor sector in the Netherlands, which is promoting a joint training programme for experts from the Netherlands and India (Indo-Dutch Online Semicon School, 2024).

5 Conclusions

Throughout these lines I have sought to highlight recent developments in India-EU relations, as well as new European players beyond Germany and France. The fact that the first official visit of Ursula von der Leyen's new European Commission in 2025 was to India with the aim of extending the relationship to more strategic areas is highly significant. However, the potential for collaboration is much greater, given India's economic value as a market as well as a counterweight to China, not to mention its cultural richness. The range of sectoral collaborations with India is increasingly broad, with a growing geostrategic character, as evidenced by the various bilateral collaborations between India and its partners detailed in this chapter.

Given the transactional tendency that currently dominates the international arena, President Trump's new term in office can be expected to exacerbate this. Hence, the circumstances are ideal for fostering even closer ties between Europe and India. Moreover, the US administration is likely to seek closer ties with Moscow as a counterweight to China, which could give India more legitimacy in its relationship with Russia. Still, the perception of vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, on the European side, and China, on the Indian side, is one of the most sensitive variables in the bilateral relationship, one that needs to be managed optimally going forward.

It would be a great missed opportunity not to take advantage of the great potential of the bilateral relationship between India and Europe, including Spain. This is not to lose sight of the country's structural challenges, including wealth inequality and the risk of an even more ethnic and nationalist discourse dominating domestic politics. It is also clear that the transition in the world order is pushing Europe to become much more pragmatic and to follow a path increasingly alienated from the multialienation of India. This is therefore a particularly favourable moment to raise the convergence of interests between Europe and India, including on the trade, green transition, digital transition and critical technologies agendas.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The neighbourhood policy in South Asia: a weak flank of India's foreign policy

Mario López Areu

Abstract

In the field of security and international relations, there is an optimistic consensus on India's growing strengths as a global power. Whilst such a general judgement can be considered correct, this chapter seeks to address what is believed to be one of the weakest flanks of India's foreign policy, its neighbourhood policy in South Asia. The aim is to analyse the content of this policy, which has focused on preserving its position as a hegemonic power, first in the face of the Pakistani challenge and now in the face of China. India's neighbourhood policy presents a paradox: whilst India has advocated a policy of non-alignment, now multialignment and non-interference in domestic policy for itself, in the case of its neighbours it has itself sought alignment by meddling in their domestic policies. This attitude has not only been an obstacle to regional integration in South Asia, but has also led to a nationalist backlash in its neighbours that has opened the door to Chinese influence.

Keywords

South Asia, Indian Ocean, Neighbourhood policy, SAARC, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar.

1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse India's neighbourhood policy in South Asia (Subcontinent and Indian Ocean), which has focused on preserving India's position as a hegemonic power, first in the face of the Pakistani challenge and now in the face of China. India's neighbourhood policy presents a paradox: whilst India has advocated a policy of non-alignment, now multialignment and non-interference in domestic politics for itself, in the case of its neighbours it has itself sought alignment by meddling in their domestic politics. This attitude has not only been an obstacle to regional integration in South Asia, but has also led to a nationalist backlash in its neighbours that has opened the door to Chinese influence.

The chapter follows the following structure. First, the historical evolution of India's neighbourhood policy shall be analysed, focusing on three periods with their own doctrines: the period from independence to 1965, characterised by Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership as prime minister and his idealist doctrine; the period from 1965 to 1990, dominated by Indira Gandhi's own Indira doctrine and her successor, Rajiv Gandhi and, finally, the period from 1990 to the present day, characterised by the liberalisation of the Indian economy and its integration into the global economy. The second section shall delve into India's current neighbourhood policy, analysing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's *Neighbourhood first* (2014-present). After these first two general sections, we shall now turn to the main features of India's relations with its neighbours: Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. We shall conclude the chapter by presenting some of the key issues for India's future neighbourhood policy in the changing regional order of the Indo-Pacific, with a particular emphasis on regional integration and the future of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Indian Ocean security and how such a policy affects India's projection as a superpower.

2 The historical evolution of India's neighbourhood policy

The doctrinal basis of India's foreign policy cannot be understood without taking into account its prioritisation of the preservation of its sovereignty, understood in a broad and multifocal manner — territorial, political, economic and military— through the principle of strategic autonomy (Jaishankar, 2020).

The preservation of strategic autonomy is the fundamental and non-negotiable pillar of India's foreign policy. In the case of its neighbourhood, South Asia and the Indian Ocean, India is obliged to lead the region to ensure such strategic autonomy. There are several reasons for this obligation. First, its geographical position, sharing a border and acting as a node between the rest of the countries in the region (China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan). Second, it is the historical and cultural cradle of the region. Third, its economic size makes it the locomotive and the key commercial and logistical factor in the success or failure of regional development. The obligation to lead presents opportunities, but also challenges for India and more so in the fluid present of the Indo-Pacific, where China seeks to expand its sphere of influence to the south as well.

This first section shall examine the evolution of India's foreign doctrine in its three historical phases, with particular reference to its neighbourhood policy.

2.1 Phase one (1947-1971): the idealism of the Nehru doctrine

The first phase (1947-1971) of India's foreign policy is marked by the figure and ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister who guided the country to independence from the British Empire and led it through its first two decades, shaping its main State policies. The Nehru foreign policy doctrine was characterised by a combination of internationalist idealism and the preservation of the country's strategic autonomy in a context of territorial tensions with its neighbours, China and Pakistan, and between the two ideological blocs of the Cold War.

Internationalism in the Nehru doctrine can be explained on the basis of two factors. The first is the experience of the two World Wars, which Nehru argued were rooted in the confrontation between exclusionary nationalisms. And the second is the anti-colonial cause in Asia and Africa. Under Nehru, India played an important leadership role in the post-World War II decolonisation process, promoting rapprochement and twinning between Asian and African countries with the aim of establishing a post-colonial coalition to challenge Western domination of the international system and call for its reform.

Internationalist idealism in Nehru's doctrine, however, always went hand in hand with the preservation of the country's stra-

tegic autonomy, which he saw as conditioned by two factors: its complex territorial reality and the polarisation between blocs of the Cold War. In the first case, India faced —and still faces— the need to defend its territorial integrity on its western borders with Pakistan in Kashmir and, to the north, on the nearly four thousand kilometres of non-consensual border with China. In the second, the polarisation between the US and Soviet blocs presented the challenge that alignment with either bloc would imply *de facto* a return to subservience to a foreign power that would limit the country's autonomy of judgement and action in both domestic and foreign policy:

“We have not given up the right to decide for ourselves as to what we should do and what we should not do in any particular set of circumstances. To give up that right to decide means to give up both our independence of judgement and independence of action” (Nehru, 2014: 275).

The defence of strategic autonomy was embodied in the development of the two normative pillars that inform Indian foreign policy: the *Panchsheel Doctrine*, also known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and the doctrine of No-Alignment.

The *Panchsheel Doctrine* was a set of normative principles agreed between India and the People's Republic of China in 1954 to regulate their coexistence. This doctrine is made up of five points:

1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
2. Mutual non-aggression agreement.
3. Mutual agreement on non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
4. Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit.
5. Peaceful coexistence.

Panchsheel represents a commitment to a post-colonial interpretation of international relations, whose fundamental basis is the inviolability of national sovereignty and the autonomy of action of States, free from external interference.

The second major pillar of Indian foreign policy has been the doctrine of non-alignment. Non-alignment emerges directly from the objective of preserving India's autonomy of action from the pressures of the two ideological blocs of the Cold War in order to maximise opportunities for international cooperation with either country for its own benefit.

Nehru's intellectual stature means that his principles retain an important normative influence on contemporary Indian foreign policy (Mehta, 2009). In the last decade, however, a line of argument has spread that blames the idealism of the Nehru doctrine for India's low standing on the international stage *vis-à-vis* other countries of similar size. This school of thought draws in particular on India's failure to preserve its strategic space after the geographical reconfiguration in post-colonial South Asia in the 1950s. A prime example of this lack of forcefulness in relation to its neighbourhood would be its underestimation of the geostrategic importance of China's annexation of Tibet, which opened up the northern border of the subcontinent to Chinese influence, but also exposed India militarily, as seen in the 1962 War (Quanyu, 2005). Another example would be to have referred the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir to the UN Security Council in 1948, instead of making use of India's military superiority at the time—as it did with Hyderabad in 1948 or Goa in 1961—giving rise to the entrenchment of the rivalry between the two States and its security derivatives, such as the arms race, the nuclear issue and terrorism.

In short, Nehruvian idealism was able to put together an innovative foreign policy that sought, above all, India's political autonomy as a sovereign State in an international context of strong polarisation and regional instability, with the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam and territorial challenges with Pakistan and China. And in turn, it was a beacon of optimism in a polarised world and a demand for a democratisation of global governance in line with the new post-colonial reality.

2.2 Phase two (1971-1989): the realist turn in the Indira doctrine

The second phase (1972-1989) in the evolution of India's foreign policy was characterised by the real, if not formal, abandonment of the more idealistic aspects of the Nehru doctrine and the strengthening of the more pragmatic ones related to the protection of national sovereignty and the country's strategic autonomy under the so-called Indira doctrine.

The key factor in this second phase was the convergence of interests that was taking place between the US and the EU, the US, China and Pakistan. Pakistan was already, separately, an ally of China and the US beforehand. In the case of the former, both countries shared territorial disputes with India. And in the case

of the latter, Pakistan's alignment with the capitalist bloc —as part of South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treat Organisation (CENTO)— meant US support for its positions on the Kashmir issue and the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971. Nevertheless, the convergence of the anti-Soviet positions in the US and China gave rise to a much more important geostrategic challenge. This situation led India to pivot towards the other great superpower, the Soviet Union, leading to the most significant international agreement signed by India to date: the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of 1971. The signing of the treaty fostered a special relationship that translated into intense economic and military cooperation and Soviet support for Indian positions in relation to the territorial dispute with Pakistan, but also Indian diplomatic support for the USSR, for example during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989).

The US alignment with with China-Pakistan and its positioning of the UN Security Council, saved by Soviet vetoes, in favour of the latter in the Kashmir conflict, coupled with an autarkic economic model at the domestic level, conditioned India's foreign strategy in this period. India then becomes what C. Raja Mohan (2003) has defined as "a sovereignty hawk". A position characterised by a sense of grievance, fostering distrust in the global governance architecture, which is seen as operating against Indian interests.

With this interpretation of the international context, the Indira doctrine shifts India's foreign policy towards *realpolitik* and the protection of national interests over compliance with international norms. This entails moving away from multilateral agreements, based on maximalist positions rejecting any external interference in Indian political decisions. An illustrative example of this is the refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the blocking attitude towards trade treaties that were beginning to be negotiated through international rounds, first under the umbrella of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later under the World Trade Organisation (WTO). India's position and its ability to coordinate a large number of countries, through its Third World alliances of the NAM and G77, were key to the failure, or at least slow progress, of the treaties in the pre-2000s period. More recently, we have also seen a similar position from India in the negotiation rounds of international agreements in the fight against climate change.

At the regional level, the Indira doctrine translated into a greater projection of Indian power in South Asia and its assertion as a

regional, hegemonic power through a kind of Monroe Doctrine (Hagerty, 1991: 352). This Indian Monroe Doctrine was based on three axes: 1) that no foreign power should involve itself in South Asian regional affairs; 2) that any foreign meddling in South Asia that does not recognise India's pre-eminence shall be considered contrary to its interests; and 3) that any external assistance required by a State in the region should always be directed first to India.

The influence of the Indira doctrine in South Asia is crucial because it implies a strong shift in strategy towards its neighbours. If under the Nehru doctrine, India pursued a strategy of generosity, friendship and non-interference in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, under Indira it adopted a position of offensive realism in which meddling became the norm. Thus, India actively participated in the Bangladeshi War of Independence against Pakistan in 1971, was again active in Bangladesh in 1975 after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, and intervened in the 1975 referendum to abolish the monarchy in Sikkim and incorporate it into the Indian republic.

The proactive Indian assertiveness in South Asia established by the Indira doctrine continued after the death of its proponent, under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi who inherited an unstable neighbourhood and a complex domestic situation, following Indira's assassination by Sikh separatists. At the macro level, Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 War and the loss of its territories in the east, on the one hand, and India's nuclear test in 1974, consolidated the Sino-Pakistani alliance that India was so concerned about from a geo-strategic envelopment point of view. At the micro level, several crises pushed India towards greater interventionism in neighbouring countries. First there was the outbreak of the Sri Lankan civil war in 1983 which led to the anti-Tamil pogrom of Black July that same year and the arrival of thousands of refugees to India. In the Maldives, the 1988 coup attempt forced India's swift intervention to preserve the democratic government of Abdul Gayoom. And finally, King Mahendra's strategy in Nepal, seeking equidistance between China and India, ended with the Indian embargo on the country in 1989 that would lead to the end of the feudal regime of the Panchayat Raj and the country's democratic transition.

Ton sum, during this phase of the Indira doctrine's offensive realism between 1971 and 1989, India was involved in one major war and three regional conflicts, in addition to several smaller

interventions in South Asia — a greater intensity of activity than at any time in the country's modern history.

2.3 Phase three (1990-present day): economic liberalization and global ambitions

The third phase in the evolution of Indian foreign policy begins after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This phase is determined by the impetus to free trade and neoliberal globalisation stemming from US hegemony, which also brought the Indian economic model of autarky into disrepute, and the end of Cold War bloc politics, which rendered the existing conception of non-alignment obsolete.

The discrediting of the previous economic model led to the liberalisation of the Indian economy, initiated with the reforms launched by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991 and consolidated by his successors until today. Since economic liberalisation, the GDP growth rate has risen from a perennial 3% to an average of 6-7% per annum since the turn of the century; built on a solid foundation of exports of goods, services, capital and skilled labour (Kochhar *et al.*, 2006). In fact, India is the fastest growing G20 economy in the post-pandemic period. The strength of the Indian economy following liberalisation has dispelled doubts about the country's openness, giving it greater confidence in its ability to compete in the global economy. This increased confidence and the rise in foreign investment flows into India and Indian investment abroad have led to a convergence of commercial interests and integration into the global economy, reviving India's interest in influencing multilateral economic decision-making fora. Compared to its big regional rival, China, Indian capital invested USD 14 billion abroad in 2007, compared to USD 18 billion in China (Mattoo and Subramanian, 2008: 64). More importantly, Indian companies tend to invest in high-tech, high-skilled industries and often within large global economies, such as the US and the EU (Ramamurti and Singh, 2008: 53).

If India's integration into the liberal economic order began in the 1990s, its political and military rapprochement with the West, in particular the US —which began after the launch of the George W. Bush administration's war on terror (2000-2008)— has been consolidated with the rise to power of Xi Jinping in China (2013-present).

As noted above, Western powers have historically prioritised the relationship with Pakistan, seen as a country aligned with the capitalist bloc. This situation, coupled with strong anti-colonialist ancestry, had instilled within the Indian diplomatic corps an instinctively hostile attitude towards US and Western positions (Datta-Ray, 2013: 246).

However, the realisation of the Islamist connection in Pakistan after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 led to a change in the US position towards its traditional ally. This, coupled with attacks by Pakistani armed groups in India, such as the 2008 Mumbai attack, created a first rapprochement between India and the US in the field of counterterrorism intelligence. In turn, the promotion of democracy around the world, part of the broader ideological scaffolding of the war on terror, found in India, the world's largest democracy by population, a symbol in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes.

If the shared experience of Islamist terrorism opened the door to overcoming suspicions in Indo-US relations, China's consolidation as a revisionist superpower under the leadership of Xi Jinping has further strengthened ties between the former. The US sees India as a major player in the coalition of countries that can act as a counterweight to China's hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

At the regional level, this third phase is characterised by China's growing influence in South Asia. Chinese meddling can be explained by two factors. The first is a natural attempt by China to lead the order in the Indo-Pacific, through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The second is the Indian assumption that, by increasing its influence in the subcontinent, China seeks to contain India's projection by forcing it to expend effort and resources on retaining its hegemonic position, leaving China a free hand in the rest of Asia. In the face of the growing Chinese threat, India is maintaining its strategy of offensive realism in South Asia, with military actions such as in the Doklam high plateau in Bhutan in 2017 or the more recent actions against Pakistan in the aftermath of the Pulwama crisis in 2019 or against China in Galwan in 2020-2021, but reinforcing it with greater integration into the liberal coalition in the Indo-Pacific, through initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) or the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor; as well as strengthening its economic projection through the *Act East Policy* with Southeast Asia.

3 Neighbourhood policy today: Narendra Modi's *Neighbourhood First*

Narendra Modi's accession to power in 2014 marked a turning point in Indian politics and foreign policy. This assertion is based on the fact that Modi's popularity has served to consolidate over the last decade an ideological paradigm shift in India from the hegemony of the ideas and policies of the Indian National Congress to those of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (López Areu, 2018: 114).

The BJP, as a Hindu party, advocates a reconceptualisation of the founding idea of the Indian nation, developed during the years of political hegemony of the Indian National Congress, which conceives the essence of *Indianness* in its multi-identity character and the shared value of respect for diversity (Khilnani, 1997). For its part, the BJP advocates a conception of the Indian nation equivalent to the *hindu rashtra* or Hindu nation.

From a foreign policy perspective, this shift implies the displacement of Nehruvian idealism by a nationalist realism, based on the government's analysis of the current international order, which it perceives to be in a process of change, in which the liberal normativity derived from post-Cold War Western hegemony has given way to open competition between powers, where national interest is paramount. In this light, India's foreign policy has gained momentum under the decade-long rule of Modi and his influential foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. In the regional context, this momentum is reflected in the *Neighbourhood First* initiative.

At the start of his first term in April 2014, Modi sought to make a major shift and symbolise the importance of South Asia on his list of foreign policy priorities by inviting the leaders of all member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) —Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan— to his swearing-in. A few months later, at the 18th SAARC summit in November 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal, India promoted a joint statement advocating a revitalisation of the regional organisation to accelerate the pace of economic integration with neighbouring countries. This declaration, known as the Kathmandu Declaration, was a first step in the *Neighbourhood First* initiative.

The *Neighbourhood First* policy is based on three lines of action and two approaches to work. The three axes are the promotion

of intra-regional trade, the deepening of inter-state connectivity and security cooperation. Whilst the two focal points of work are developing mutual trust between India and its neighbours through direct contact and dialogue, and moving from promises to deeds, reducing the historical deficit in India's compliance with bilateral and regional agreements (Muni, 2017: 122).

In the first two years of *Neighbourhood First*, several initiatives gave rise to optimism regarding the new Indian neighbourhood policy. In the area of trade and connectivity, in 2015 the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Initiative (known as BBIN) was launched to promote joint initiatives between these countries in areas such as energy interconnection, transport of goods or the management of water resources, all of which are significant for smaller countries in their quest for better access to the sea and, therefore, to global markets (Das, 2023: 32). In the area of security, India promoted the *Security and Growth for All in the Region* (SAGAR) initiative in the Indian Ocean, together with countries such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles; and in 2015 the Lok Sabha ratified the Indo-Bangladeshi agreement on the border between the two countries, which had been stalled since 2011. In addition, Modi undertook an intensive agenda of bilateral visits to countries in the region, where he sought to build trusting relationships with the respective heads of government and citizens, highlighting cultural and historical ties, but also offering development assistance in the form of soft loans and grants, as well as partnerships in soft power areas such as culture and higher education.

However, after this initial momentum, the new neighbourhood policy soon began to go awry for two reasons. The first was the intensification of the ongoing rivalry with Pakistan and China, a historic obstacle to regional integration. And second, India's own clumsiness in dealing with disagreements with the rest of the smaller neighbours.

The historical rivalry with Pakistan and China presents two challenges. In the case of the former, how to deal with the rise of terrorism and religious extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly after the Western withdrawal and the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, and also how to prevent Indo-Pakistani polarisation from hampering SAARC initiatives in favour of regional integration. In the case of China, the main challenge is how to contain this northern neighbour's growing presence and influence in South Asia. The reality is that China is already a key

player in the subcontinent, both economically and in the security sphere, and smaller countries in the region see China's presence as an opportunity to escape from Indian dependence and thus pivot between the two powers to their own advantage.

In relation to this second point, it is worth noting that countries in the region have become much more nationalistic in the last decade, mirroring the global trend. National leaderships often adopt national-populist positions on India as a way of bolstering their domestic popularity. Often, the relationship with India is determined on the basis of whether it supports the ruling party; if not, it is accused of intruding on national sovereignty (Das, 2023: 28). Within this national-populist dynamic, India has failed to react intelligently, launching rhetorical attacks and using its dominant economic position as a form of pressure. An illustrative example of this situation was the unofficial embargo that Nepal suffered in 2015 by India, which was perceived by the Nepalese public as an attempt to influence the constituent process taking place in the country and which represented a turning point for the consolidation of an anti-Indian sentiment among the Nepalese public (López Areu, 2015).

These unnecessary errors in neighbourhood policy have not only undermined the initial successes of the *Neighbourhood First* initiative to build a relationship of mutual trust, but have also opened a flank of weakness in India's geopolitical position, particularly in relation to China. The Galwan crisis in 2020 consolidated a trend of intensifying territorial disputes in the Himalayas between India and China. As mentioned above, India perceives such an intensification as part of a broader strategy by Xi Jinping to reshape the regional order in Asia through an expansion of its territorial claims backed by greater military involvement. This strategy, also visible in Taiwan and the East and South China Seas, involves India both on the northern border and in the Indian Ocean, where Beijing has increased its capacity for action, both through naval exercises and the development of infrastructure such as the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and its first permanent overseas military base in Djibouti.

4 Indo-Nepali relations

The historical relationship between India and Nepal is probably the closest that both have with any other country. Geographically, the two countries share a wide border with freedom of movement,

spanning five Indian states. In terms of population, of Nepal's thirty million people, six million live and work in India. And finally, at the cultural level, they share languages —Nepali is the official language in Sikkim and Hindi, Bhojpuri and Maithili are widely spoken in southern Nepal— apart from sharing religious beliefs and practices and family ties. At the economic level, relations are also strategic: 72% of Nepalese exports went to India and 63% of imports came from its southern neighbour and 35% of foreign direct investment in Nepal is Indian¹. From a security point of view, Nepal acts as a buffer zone on the unstable Indo-Chinese border, but also the open border between the two countries requires monitoring due to the risk of illegal trafficking of arms, drugs and counterfeit money, but also of terrorist groups using Nepalese territory as a base to launch operations in India (Prasant, 2016: 97).

"Nepal is like a yam between two rocks". This is one of the best known and most repeated quotes from King Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775), who unified Nepal as a State in the 18th century and became even more significant after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1951, which turned Nepal into a State of high strategic value (Poudyal, 2022: 19). Nepal's geostrategic position has made the country a major focus of attention for regional and global powers. During the colonial period, Nepal signed international treaties with various powers, first with the British East India Company —the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli— and later with the Raj, the British Nepalese Treaty of 1923. Likewise, in 1947, the US and Nepal signed the Agreement of Commerce and Friendship, which would open the door to the entry of US development aid into the country from 1949 onwards as part of Truman's strategy of containing communism in Asia (Onta *et al.*, 2024: 5).

Following the establishment of India as an independent republic, the two countries signed the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950. For Nehru, the bilateral agreement was important to preserve India's hegemony in the subcontinent vis-à-vis China and the US. (Dabhade and Pant, 2004: 163). The treaty, which is still in force, established a security alliance in which India and Nepal agreed to inform each other of possible conflicts with neighbours and to consult and support each other

¹ See: World Bank. (2022). Nepal trade. [Accessed on: 18 February 2025]. <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/NPL>; Nepal Rastra Bank.. 2024. Survey report on foreign direct investment in Nepal. [Accessed on: 18 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.nrb.org.np/contents/uploads/2024/08/SurveyReportonForeignDirectInvestment202223.pdf>

by sending supplies and weapons in the event of armed conflict. The treaty also covers issues of economic development, political and social stability in Nepal, guaranteeing for example freedom of trade, investment and movement of people and capital between the two States (Thapliyal, 2012: 120).

The Treaty of Peace and Friendship has been instrumental in shaping close Indo-Nepali relations, but it has also been criticised by more nationalist factions of the Nepalese political class for establishing a relationship of economic and security subordination of the country to India. Indeed, the fall of the democratic government of Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala (1959-1960), whose Nepali Congress Party was inspired by the Indian National Congress and had been explicitly supported by Nehru, and the imposition of the autocratic regime of King Mahendra (1961-1990) saw a major shift in Nepalese foreign policy. Mahendra established as the main objective of Nepal's foreign policy the pivot to India and China and neutrality based on non-alignment, a doctrine to which the country had been officially attached since the Bandung Conference. Mahendra thus sought to take advantage of Nepal's strategic position to reduce its dependence on India, fostering a closer relationship with China as well on the basis of the Sino-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1960 and the Sino-Nepal Border Treaty of 1961. The signing of both treaties allowed Nepal to consolidate its status of neutrality between the two neighbours, as, for example, when it resisted military support to India, as required by the 1950 treaty, in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. After its defeat in the War, a weakened India did not want to jeopardise its relationship with Nepal and expand the northern front, which consolidated Mahendra's position (Mage, 2007: 834).

Despite Nepalese attempts to play both sides, the country's heavy economic dependence on India was an important ace up New Delhi's sleeve in managing the relationship with the sceptical Mahendra in the 1970s and 1980s. The relationship, however, eventually broke down completely in 1989, following a series of economic and security disagreements, in particular the Nepalese attempt to purchase Chinese arms in 1988, which New Delhi considered a violation of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, consistent with the Indira doctrine of offensive realism, saw the various disputes as a whole as a challenge to India's dominant position in Indo-Nepal relations and called for regime change in its neighbour. He thus initiated a series of pressure actions, including support for the Nepalese

democratic opposition in exile in India, which led to a de facto trade embargo that brought about a severe economic crisis in Nepal, contributing to the overthrow of the autocratic regime in 1990. The new democratic regime, led by the pro-India Nepali Congress Party, restored the special relationship with India. For its part, New Delhi went out of its way to support the new regime by making economic concessions and opening itself to revising the Treaty of Peace and Friendship to adapt it to the new post-Cold War context (Bhattarai, 2018: 3).

The stability of Nepal's new democratic regime was short-lived, giving way at the turn of the century to a turbulent period. First, civil war broke out between the State and Maoist guerrillas (1996-2006). Secondly, in 2001, the regicide that brought the authoritarian Gyanendra Shah to the throne took place. And finally, the combination of the two crises eventually led to the popular revolution that ended the monarchy in 2008.

Republican Nepal post-2008 is a very different and sharply divided country. On the one hand, there is the *Pahadi* community, which has historically controlled political and economic power in Nepal, and on the other, the ethnic minorities who had been discriminated against in society and excluded economically and politically. Whilst the first group seeks to retain its dominant position through a centralised country model, the second group calls for decentralisation to give them greater autonomy (Jha, 2014). Throughout the constituent process, India showed strong support for the demands of the Madhesi community, the Nepalese ethnic group with strong cultural and family ties with India and which supported a federal and decentralised constitutional model. The promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 was followed by strong protests from various minority groups, including Madhesis, who criticised an agreement between the three major national parties, controlled by the Pahadi elite, to dilute the federal character of the new State (López Areu 2015). With Narendra Modi in power and under pressure from political forces in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh —Indian states bordering Nepal and with strong links to the Madhesi political community—, India sought to pressure Kathmandu to revise the constitutional text. Days before the enactment, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar flew to Kathmandu to meet Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and convince him to make changes in the Constitution, which resulted in fuel shortages for months.

India's intervention in the Nepalese constitutional crisis was the first step in the derailment of Narendra Modi's *Neighbourhood First* policy. The lack of gas for cooking or petrol for transport as a result of the embargo had a major impact on the daily lives of Nepalis and the new prime minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, skilfully turned this discontent into a political weapon, accusing India of wanting to violate Nepalese national sovereignty. Oli recalled Nepal's ambassador to New Delhi for consultations and visited Beijing a few days later to sign several trade and transit agreements. Oli's nationalist stance and anti-India rhetoric have earned him great popularity in the country and cemented a strategic shift in Nepal from India to China. Nor has it helped that the Rashtriya Swayasemvak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), part of the Indian Hindu nationalist galaxy of which Narendra Modi is a member, have politically and financially promoted political and social movements in Nepal that seek to re-establish Hinduism as the official state religion, reversing the secularisation of 2015.

Indo-Nepali relations have been marked by a sense of grievance on the part of Nepal by the fact that the regional power has used its economic might to establish a relationship of political subordination. The 2015 crisis coincided in time with China's increased projection in South Asia under Xi Jinping's Presidency, and Nepal now sees China as an opportunity to escape its economic dependence on India. In 2019, Nepal and China signed the Transit and Transport Agreement that facilitated Nepali exports through six border posts to China and also from four Chinese seaports —Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang— to international markets². In 2024, after Oli's return to power, for the first time in its modern history, the Nepalese prime minister made his first foreign trip not to India, but to China. The visit also saw the signing of Nepal's entry into China's Belt and Road Initiative, which previous governments had resisted because of strong Indian opposition and also because of the risk of losing its historic position as a non-aligned country. Nepal's entry into the initiative shall see a significant increase in Chinese investment in the country, including the development of the *Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network*, three economic-industrial corridors and the development of several hydropower projects.

² See: *The Himalayan Times*. (2016). Nepal, China pen transit trade treaty, nine other pacts, 22 March. [Accessed on: 07 February 2025]. Available at: <https://thehimalayan-times.com/business/nepalchinapenpentransittradetreatyninepacts>.



In conclusion, the 2015 crisis and the rise of national-populism in Nepal, particularly in the form of K. P. Oli, pose a serious challenge to India's bilateral relations with Nepal and its security on the increasingly tense northern border. Nepal's entry into the Belt and Road Initiative is a great success for China and partly also a result of India's underestimating of Kathmandu's political distancing. Given the likely drastic cutback in US development aid with the arrival of Donald Trump as President and the dismantling of USAID, which could cost Nepal up to USD 700 million in direct aid, India runs the risk that if it does not act to mend relations with Nepal, Nepal shall inexorably fall into Beijing's sphere of influence and that increased connectivity between the two countries shall in turn pose a security risk to India.

5 Indo-Bangladeshi relations

India and Bangladesh share a common culture, history and language through Bengali. Moreover, the border between the two, which includes the strategic Siliguri Pass that connects the north-eastern region with the rest of India, is the longest that India has

with an adjacent country. Bangladesh also plays a dominant role in India's security calculations, especially in ensuring peace and stability in the ever volatile northeast. Economically, Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, with a bilateral volume of nearly USD 16 billion in 2023³.

Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, supported by India, was a major geostrategic success for India, reducing its territorial exposure to its main regional rival and helping to consolidate the security of its eastern border. This is why India has since considered the relationship with Bangladesh as strategic to its security.

However, this strategic consideration of the relationship has not always been reciprocated by Bangladesh. A key determinant of the thermometer of relations between the two countries is who holds political power in Bangladesh, whilst it is rather insignificant who holds political power in India. In particular, the bilateral relationship has tended to be stronger when the secular Awami League is in power and less so when the conservative Islamic Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is in power. This dichotomy is well explained by comparing the governments of the two women who have dominated both parties and Bangladeshi politics in the last two decades, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the BNP.

Whilst under Hasina's first Government (1996-2001) the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was signed, ending the strategic dispute between the two countries over control of the river's water resources, which had been a key destabilising factor in the relationship, Zia's accession to power in 2001 marked a deterioration of the relationship. In 2006, India accused the Zia government of harbouring secessionist forces in northeast India. The crisis led to the cancellation of several interconnection projects between the two countries, such as the trilateral India-Bangladesh-Myanmar gas pipeline.

With Hasina's return to power in 2009, India-Bangladesh relations returned to the path of progress with significant advances in the fields of economy, energy and security cooperation. On the trade front, India agreed to tariff-free access for all Bangladeshi products to its market, a move that has the potential to increase

³ See: Ministry of External Affairs. (2024). IndiaBangladesh bilateral relations. [Accessed on: 05 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BilateralBriefBangladeshFebruary2024.pdf>

the export of Bangladeshi goods to India and reduce the trade deficit. India extended a USD 1 billion line of credit to Bangladesh for infrastructure development, of which USD 200 million was non-repayable. On the energy front, India and Bangladesh inaugurated a cross-border power transmission line in 2013, enabling the start of energy trade between the two countries. Bangladesh now imports 500 MW of electricity from India.

After the ups and downs during the Zia governments, security cooperation between the two countries intensified sharply, especially in the area of countering cross-border terrorism and insurgency following India's ratification of the Border Delineation Agreement (BDA) in 2014 with Modi in power.

The coincidence of Modi and Hasina in power since 2014 and the adoption of the *Neighbourhood First* policy gave a boost to Indo-Bangladeshi relations. In June 2015, Modi, on an official visit to Dhaka, pushed for the signing of 22 bilateral agreements, mainly in the area of interconnectivity, with proposed new rail lines and roads, as well as improved access to the ports of Chittagong and Mongla. The implementation of the agreements is supported by a USD 2 billion Indian line of credit⁴. Interconnectivity with Bangladesh is a crucial element for India for two reasons. Firstly, it allows for greater integration of the northeast with the rest of the country, which is key to its economic development, but also in case of conflict with China. Secondly, Bangladesh is key for India's projection to South East Asia, como as part of its Act East strategy. These bilateral agreements should be seen in line with regional institutional initiatives in which both countries play a leading role such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the afore-said Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Multimodal Transport Agreement (BBIN).

Security cooperation has also been one of the main avenues of collaboration since 2014, especially after the Burdwan attack in the Indian state of West Bengal, but also due to the intensification of migration flows and Rohingya armed activity following the political crisis in Myanmar. Since then, both countries have worked to strengthen existing initiatives, such as intelligence sharing, whilst simultaneously exploring new areas of cooper-

⁴ See: *Business Today*. (2015). India, Bangladesh ink 22 agreements. Here's the list, 7 June. [Accessed on: 03 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/deals/story/pmnarendramodisigns22dealswithbangladesh4862820150607>

ation. During Modi's visit in 2015, the two countries signed an agreement to jointly tackle cross-border crimes, especially counterfeit currency smuggling and human trafficking. Following the border delineation agreement, which included the maritime border as well, security cooperation has been extended to the maritime domain, for example through joint operations of the two countries' coast guards.

Despite the momentum in Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral relations over the last decade (2014-2024), coinciding with good personal relations between Modi and Hasina, these have not been without challenges for India. The main one is the growing presence of Chinese interests in Bangladesh. Dhaka joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016 and since then the relationship has intensified considerably. An illustrative comparison is between the USD 3 billion that India has offered Bangladesh for infrastructure development with China's nearly USD 24 billion pledged for trade, transport and energy projects. The fact that China is not among the top ten importers of Bangladeshi products provides a strong incentive for the bilateral relationship to grow. Similarly, in the field of security, Bangladesh has made China its main arms supplier, accounting for almost 70% of its arms purchases in 2020, worth USD 546 million, making it the second largest foreign buyer for China's arms industry⁵.

A second challenge for India has been its lack of ability to maintain stable relations with Bangladesh regardless of the party in power. It is true that the BNP is grounded in a national-populist rhetoric, which includes a communal pro-Islamic and anti-Hindu tinge, but also that India's bid for Sheikh Hasina has been highly controversial. Hasina's government, which had evolved towards authoritarianism and carried out clear violations of human rights and freedoms, was overthrown in 2024 by a democratic revolution. India's support for Hasina, including lobbying other foreign powers to overlook her government's violations of fundamental rights and then accepting her in India after the exile upon her fall, damaged India's image both with the new Bangladeshi government, led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, and with the country's public⁶.

⁵ See: SIPRI. (2020). "Trends in international arms transfers, 2023". [Accessed 26 January 2025]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU\(03\)fs_2103_at_2020.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU(03)fs_2103_at_2020.pdf).

⁶ See: *Financial Times*. (2024). India's Bangladesh bet backfires after Sheikh Hasina ousted, 8 August. [Accessed on: 07 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/6961f171d4334fab90c98fca790547d6>

Hasina's fall has left India in a very delicate situation in Bangladesh. Although Yunus has not fuelled the controversy, there is no doubt that the relationship with China has now taken priority. Equally notable is the revival of relations between Bangladesh-Pakistan after the fall of Hasina, two countries whose relations were minimal after the 1971 War (Rizve, 2025). A closer relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh could lead to anti-Indian cooperation around a common Islamist position, particularly if the BNP in Bangladesh and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) return to power in the future. This would have implications for India not only in terms of security, but also in terms of leadership in various regional forums.

6 Indo-Sri Lanka relations

Sri Lanka is a country of great importance to India for two main reasons. The first is its size and strategic position in the Indian Ocean. The second is the historical relations between the Sri Lankan and Indian Tamil communities. Both factors have often led to a conflict between Indian interests in relation to Sri Lanka, that would be, on the one hand, to guarantee Sri Lankan sovereignty by preventing the presence of foreign actors in the country and, on the other hand, to protect the Tamil community in the country from attacks by the politically dominant Sinhalese.

Despite its geostrategic importance, during the second half of the 20th century, India's policy towards Sri Lanka was dominated mainly by the Tamil factor. Especially since the 1960s, with the rise of ethno-linguistic regionalism in the Indian political system, Tamil-Dravidian sentiment was politically channelled through the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) parties in the State of Tamil Nadu (Subramanian, 2002). These parties, key in Tamil Nadu but also very influential at the national level, often set the pace for New Delhi, prioritising the Tamil issue in relations with Sri Lanka, particularly after the 1983 pogrom known as Black July, in which more than 6000 Sri Lankan Tamils were killed by the Sinhalese majority. However, the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a member of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in 1991 marked a turning point in the influence of the Tamil cause, which lost influence in Indian public opinion, despite attempts by the DMK and AIADMK to dissociate the ethnic cause from LTTE terrorism.

Sri Lanka's privileged position in the Indian Ocean has made it the focus of attention of major regional and global powers, including China, the US and the United Kingdom. The Indira Doctrine and its adaptation of the Monroe Doctrine to South Asia places the focus on trying to avoid such external influences in its neighbourhood; an objective that has been maintained after India's post-1990 openness. The big risk factor in this regard has been the rise of China and its growing presence in the Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka, in particular. Indeed, Sri Lanka has been the state in South Asia, apart from Pakistan, with which China has enhanced its economic relations the most. Such a Sino-Sri Lankan relationship even pre-dates Colombo's entry into the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and is closely tied to the Rajapaksa family, whose members have ruled Sri Lanka twice, under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2005 to 2015 and Gotabaya Rajapaksa from 2019 to 2022. The Rajapaksa family has been accused of material corruption, often linked to bribes from Chinese companies in exchange for signing major projects. Sri Lanka received around USD 4.8 billion in soft loans from China during the Mahinda Rajapaksa⁷ government. The most controversial Chinese project is the construction of the Hambantota seaport. The port opened in 2010, but lack of demand and the expansion of Colombo's largest port soon made it economically unviable. In 2017, China Merchants Port, a company under partial control of the Chinese State, acquired a majority stake in the port and a 99-year lease of the port (Hillman, 2018). The fact that Hambantota is a deep-water port is a cause of concern for India, as it could host Chinese warships and submarines, as Colombo already did, with the permission of the Rajapaksa government that did not inform India, when Chinese nuclear submarines docked at that port in 2014.

The coming to power in Sri Lanka of Maithripala Sirisena in 2015 opened a door of opportunity for India to rebalance the balance of influence in Sri Lanka *vis-à-vis* China. During the election campaign, Sirisena accused Rajapaksa of being corrupt and authoritarian, focusing his criticism on his relationship with China. India acted quickly, sending its foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, to visit the new president, and he returned the gesture, making India's first foreign visit. However,

⁷ See: *Forbes*. (2021). The story behind the world's emptiest international airport, 10 December. [Accessed on: 08 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/05/28/thestorybehindtheworldsemptiestinternationalairportsrilankasmattalarajapaksa/>

beyond fine words, there was little progress in bilateral relations between the two countries during Sirisena's tenure. Partly because his government soon entered a spiral of domestic crises that did not allow for stability.

The economic crisis that has plagued Sri Lanka since 2019 and led to the 2022 protests and the coming to power of former-revolutionary and socialist Anura Kumara Dissanayake in 2024, have consumed the Sri Lankan political class in recent years. However, they have also opened a public debate about the role China has played in the country's bankruptcy. In particular, much has been said about China's alleged "debt trap" strategy and how Sri Lanka was a kind of testing ground for it. Although the existence of such a strategy has been questioned (Wignaraja *et al.*, 2020), the search for a more sustainable economic model for the future opens a window of opportunity for India in Sri Lanka.

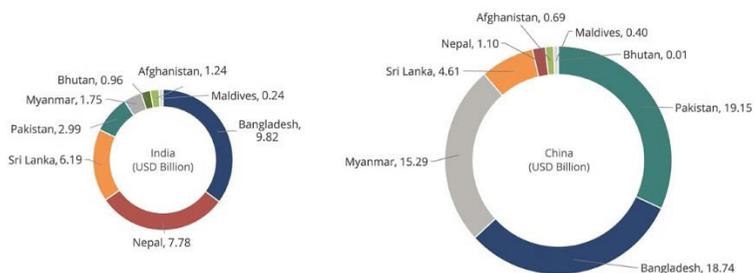
India is Sri Lanka's largest trading partner, with exports of USD 4627 million and imports of USD 913 million in 2022. This makes India the third largest market for Sri Lankan products and the largest exporter to the country. In comparison, China is not even among the top five importers of Sri Lankan products⁸. China's economic relationship with Sri Lanka has been built on direct investment in the form of credits during the period 2010-2022. In large part, this relationship —which made China Sri Lanka's largest investor— was based on the refusal of India, the EU and the US to offer credit lines to Sri Lanka during the last part of the country's civil war, when the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa was accused of war crimes against the Tamil population. Since the 2022 bankruptcy, China has stopped offering new lines of credit and investment to Sri Lanka⁹. India could take advantage of this situation given the economic weight of bilateral economic relations. Several of the agreements proposed in Modi's 2015 visit to the country in the area of civilian nuclear energy, ending fisheries tensions and finalising the 2000 Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement could be a good starting point for consolidating a new preferential relationship displacing China and which could then be extended to security and defence issues.

⁸ See: *World Bank*. (2022). Sri Lankan monthly trade data. [Accessed on: 09 February 2025]. Available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/LKA>

⁹ *The Diplomat*. Beyond debt: China Sri Lanka relations in a new era, 15 January [Accessed: 09 February 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/beyonddebtchinasrilankaeconomicrelationsinanewera/>.

Figure 3: Country-wise share of India's and China's Total Trade with South Asia (N8) in 2018

Bangladesh accounts for approx. one-third of China's trade with South Asia



Note: All figures are in USD Billion
Source: WITS, World Bank

7 Indo-Burmese relations

Although Myanmar is not strictly speaking part of the South Asian neighbourhood, the country is of great geostrategic importance to India as a gateway to Southeast Asia and thus to the success of Narendra Modi's *Act East Policy*.

The historical ties between India and Myanmar, as with the other countries in this chapter, are intense and long-standing. In addition to cultural interconnections, in the colonial period the former Burma and India were part of the British Empire and their nationalist movements shared strategies and mutual support, particularly through the strong personal relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and Aung San. Following the independence of the two countries, India in 1947 and Myanmar in 1948, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed in 1951, declaring "eternal peace and unalterable friendship" between the two nations. These beginnings between two post-colonial and ideologically like-minded states went awry with the 1962 coup d'état by General U Ne Win. The resulting military junta not only closed itself to the outside world politically, but also persecuted ethnic minorities within the country, including Indians, creating tensions with New Delhi. From then until the turn of the 20th century, Indo-Burmese relations were characterised by a cold formality. On one hand, Ne Win visited India in 1968, 1970 and 1980 and, on the other hand, India gave asylum to former Prime Minister U Un, as well as financial and political support to Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the democratic opposition and daughter of Aung San.

With the beginning of the opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s, India announced the so-called *Look East Policy* in 1991, a strategy of projection of the country towards Southeast Asia and East Asia. In 2014, Narendra Modi gave greater weight to the initiative in India's foreign policy by renaming it Act East Policy, with China already factoring into the equation.

Myanmar-China relations are very intense, particularly since the military junta came to power and the deterioration of the former's relationship with India. China and Myanmar share a 2000 kilometre border and China is the largest investor with 26% of the total and Naypydaw's trading partner with USD 2 billion in 2022. Bilateral trade between India and Myanmar was USD 1 billion in the same year, leaving it outside the top five trading partners¹⁰. In addition, China has been, along with Russia, the main supplier of armaments to the military junta, although in recent times India has increased its exports significantly to become the third largest supplier with 14% of Myanmar's total arms imports in 2023, compared to 29% for China and 42% for Russia¹¹.

Given the historically strong economic and security ties between Myanmar and China, the Modi government's objective under the Act East Policy has been not so much to try to displace China as to ensure Burma's neutrality in the competition with India. To this end, India has sought to intensify the economic and connectivity relationships. Examples are the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (Gil, 2025). On the economic front, the bilateral relationship benefited from the entry into force of the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in 2010, which has been a major boost to trade relations, with a 14% growth between 2010 and 2018¹².

Another important aspect for India is security and counterterrorism cooperation. The porous border shared between the two countries and instability in both India's northeast and Burma's Sagaing and Kachin regions, which are heavily affected by the country's post-coup civil war in 2021, has led to Indian armed

¹⁰ See: World Bank. (2022). Myanmar monthly trade data. [Accessed on: 10 February 2025]. Available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/MMR/textview>

¹¹ ²² SIPRI. (2023). "Trends in international arms transfers, 2023". [Accessed on: 10 February 2025]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU\(03\)2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU(03)2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf)

¹² Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. (2017). Foreign trade (ASEAN). [Accessed on: 10 February 2025]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170602191719/http://commerce.gov.in/InnerContent.aspx?Id=74>

groups settling in Myanmar and launching attacks in India from there. In 2019, both countries participated in joint operations against these armed groups on both sides of the border¹³.

To sum up, Indo-Burmese relations have fluctuated in recent decades due to India's support for the National League for Democracy's movement against the military junta, which relied more heavily on China. However, following Modi's rise to power and the push for the *Act East Policy*, India has adopted a more pragmatic stance. Following the restoration of military dictatorship in 2021, unlike in the past, India has maintained good relations with Min Aung Hlaing's government, including arms sales worth more than USD 51 million in 2023, according to the United Nations¹⁴. This support for the new government has allowed it to keep connectivity and security cooperation projects intact, strengthening India's position in the country with the aim of projecting itself into Southeast Asia and stabilising its north-eastern region.

8 Overall reflection and conclusion

India's growing global visibility, courted by the liberal bloc on the one hand and increasingly perceived as a strategic competitor by China on the other, projects an image of strength and influence that the Indian government itself seeks to convey. However, this image suffers from a certain overconfidence. The transition from middle to great power is always complex because it requires a significant expansion of capabilities and dispersion of economic, political and military resources. In this regard, this chapter has sought to target what is seen as a key weak flank in India's foreign and security policy: its South Asian neighbourhood. It has focused on two main causes of this weakness. Firstly, the implementation of China's strategy in the region. And secondly, the nationalist turn within small States.

As seen above, China perceives India as a systemic rival to its hegemonic ambitions in Asia. In terms of territorial and population size, economic weight and military potential, India is the

¹³ See: *The Hindu*. (2019). India, Myanmar conduct joint operation to destroy militant camps in Northeast. [Accessed on: 10 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indiamyanmarconductjointoperationtodestroymilitant-campsinnortheast/article27956142.ece>.

¹⁴ See: *DW*. How India is supporting Myanmar's military with arms. [Accessed on: 10 February 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/howindiaissupportingmyanmarsmilitarywitharms/a65733102>

only country comparable to China on the continent. Moreover, its political system opens the door to a network of potential supporters, such as the QUAD, which China does not have and which is one of its main structural weaknesses (Kim, 2021). In the face of this *Indian challenge*, China has adopted a strategy of containment of its neighbour that includes increasing military pressure on the shared border, inciting crises such as Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020, and offering economic, infrastructure and security development opportunities to the rest of the subcontinent's States, especially through its Belt and Road Initiative. China's aim is to force India to concentrate resources and efforts in its neighbourhood, diverting them from other initiatives.

China's growing influence in South Asia is partly the result of Beijing's initiative, but also of India's own mistakes. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Indian influence on the domestic politics of its neighbours has been constant in post-colonial South Asia. In the last decade, however, the global nationalist-populist trend has also taken hold in the region. This has led to a change in attitude towards external pressures, particularly from India. The economic embargo on Nepal in 2015 to influence its constitutional process or the unconditional support for Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh —despite the authoritarian nature of her regime— have produced strong nationalist and anti-Indian reactions in these countries and opened the door to greater influence from other powers, particularly China.

In the current context, based on the two axes presented above, India's approach to its neighbourhood requires change. The asymmetry of power, both economic and military, between India and its neighbours is so stark that the latter view with suspicion India's insistence on shaping the regional order through bilateral relations with each of them, rather than in multilateral forums such as SAARC. This paternalistic approach, inherited from the 20th century, is today perceived as a form of coercive diplomacy rather than a genuine attempt by India to promote regional stability and prosperity.

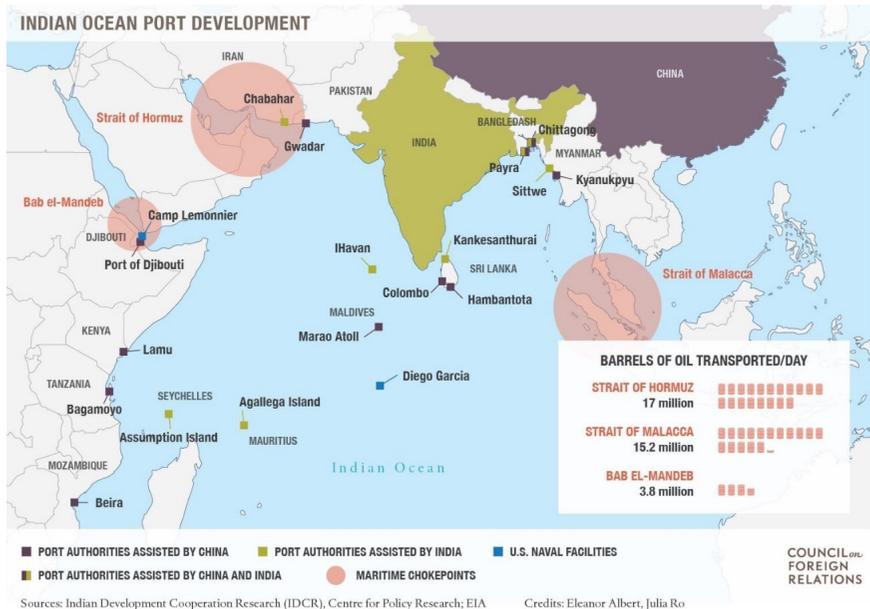
South Asia is recognised as the least globally integrated regional unit¹⁵. However, all indicators suggest that the opposite should

¹⁵ See: *UNESCAP*. (2018). Unlocking the potential of regional economic cooperation and integration in South Asia. [Accessed on: 20 February 2025]. Dispatchable at: <https://www.unescap.org/publications/unlocking-potential-regional-economic-cooperation-and-integration-south-asia-potential>.

be the case. First, the subcontinent is a vast and continuous landmass with a common historical, cultural and linguistic heritage that gives it a very cohesive identity among its populations. Second, the British colonial legacy means that the institutional and legal models of member states are very similar. Third, the legacy of colonial infrastructures, such as roads, railways or water management, is pan-regional and, through investment, these interconnectivities could be recovered. And finally, South Asia has a population of over two billion people, a quarter of the world's total, and a growing middle class. These potential synergies represent an opportunity for regional development and stability, but also for rethinking and re-legitimising India's leadership in South Asia, through a strengthening of SAARC as a multilateral forum, of which China is not a member state.

As Raja Mohan (2007) argues, without regional primacy and stability, a State cannot become a credible global power. South Asia, as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific, is at a time of geopolitical and geo-economic change. At the subcontinental level, polarisation between the liberal powers and China translates into growing security tension between India and China. On the one hand, border clashes have multiplied recently. On the other hand, with Nepal's entry into the Belt and Road Initiative in 2024, all countries in the subcontinent except India are now members of the Chinese initiative. In the Indian Ocean, a key shipping lane for global trade, with 80% of the world's oil market and a third of overall trade, the presence of major powers has increased significantly in the last decade. India, which has been the hegemonic power in this area, now faces a Chinese naval presence in Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Pakistan (Gwadar) and Djibouti. Other major nuclear powers, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France, also have territories and interests in the area. Even Pakistan is increasing its naval potential; with the launch of the first of eight submarines purchased from China, tests to launch ballistic missiles from its maritime assets and a plan to expand its Navy from twenty to fifty vessels in the coming decades. This military overpopulation is of concern to small island states such as the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Finally, there is the unknown impact of Donald Trump's presidency (2025-2029) and its impact in two areas. First, what strategy it shall adopt vis-à-vis China, and thus its commitment to consolidating the liberal framework of regional initiatives such as QUAD, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) or the



India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, among others. And secondly, if the US abandons the liberal alliance in favour of a realistprotectionist approach, this may imply a breakdown of the rules-based international order that could drag India and China into a similar approach in South Asia, with the obvious risk of confrontation that this implies.

To sum up, India has an important open front in its neighbourhood. How it manages this will indicate the country's true ability to become a superpower beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

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CHAPTER FIVE

India and its western Muslim neighbourhood

Ana Ballesteros Peiró

Abstract

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been in power in India for over sixteen and a half years. Modi is now in his third consecutive term of office, making him ruler for fifteen years in a row. The BJP is known to represent the Hindu nationalist ideology, called *hindutva*, which promotes Hindu hegemony and especially opposes Islam, which is practised by about 14% of the Indian population, i.e. more than 172 million citizens. This ideology has a more direct impact on India's relationship with Pakistan compared to Afghanistan, Iran and the Arab Gulf states. In India's foreign relations, economics is the major factor, a fact apparent in its interactions with West Asia, where the ideological weight of *hindutva* is secondary.

Keywords

India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Persian Gulf.

1 Introduction: the foundations of India's foreign policy

India has traditionally perceived itself a global leader, a view that has not always been recognised by other countries. At a time of transition in the international order, when power is shifting towards Asia and India's position is becoming more prominent, the opportunities for higher status are closer. To this end, India has not only managed to climb to fifth place in the global economy, but its potential as Asia's third great power is transcending the boundaries of South Asia, where it has traditionally dominated and from which it projects its power beyond the friendship/enemy patterns it has managed in the past.

Equally, the international scene favours this shift towards greater status, as China's assertiveness in other Asian regions is increasing interest in what India can bring as a counterweight. Thus, gradually, whilst the Indian government is acquiring the material capacities to become the global actor it has long craved, its recognition as such is reflected in its increased international interaction. Consequently, India is present in the strategic calculations of the United States and other global powers such as the European Union, Japan, China and Russia (Kapur, 2023: 19).

India's foreign policy has reflected, as in the case of other countries, a process of adaptation to domestic, South Asian and global changes. The priority is to base its relations with other countries on development. Thus, the economy is the central factor in the formulation of foreign relations.

The evolution of foreign policy doctrines has shown two unequal phases, strongly marked by the period of decolonisation and the fall of the Soviet Union. In the initial phase, foreign policy was guided by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Indian Congress Party (INC) and the longest-serving prime minister (1947-1964). Nehru championed non-alignment as a way of navigating a bipolar world, with a strategy of avoiding serving either of the two global leaders. The trauma of decolonisation, the needs of state-building, laying the foundations of post-colonial India, divided in two after the partition of Pakistan and emerging from underdevelopment, guided the country in the early years.

However, Nehru came out of his dream of pan-Asian and post-colonial solidarity when he lost the 1962 war against China. In the 1970s, with the alignment of the US and China, the Indian government moved closer to the Soviet Union, whilst maintaining its

non-aligned position with the bloc. However, the rapprochement between Pakistan, the United States and China led India to align itself more closely with the Soviet Union, a position that materialised with the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971. In this way, foreign policy began to take on a more realistic and less idealistic tone. The intervention in the war to liberate East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from West Pakistan in December 1971, for which it had Soviet backing, showed India's ability to intervene in the neighbourhood if its security was seriously affected.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India entered a new phase that ended its isolation. Foreign policy was placed at the service of economic development and the country started entering the market economy. The process has been gradual, under various leaders, starting with Narasimha Rao (1991-1996), followed by the first leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win general elections, Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1996 and 1998-2004), Manmohan Singh (INC, 2004-2014) and Narendra Modi since 2014. These leaders continued the work of integrating India into the world and away from the economic isolationism (Menon, 2021: 301) more common in its early years.

India's foreign policy maintains a desire to preserve autonomy in decision-making and exists in terms of its economic development interests. With the BJP in government, *hindutva* is no longer a purely domestic ideology, even if the ideas it can export are more in keeping with soft power and a friendly image than the more explicit chauvinism on display domestically.

Hindutva, a priori, could be seen as an obstacle to India's relations with Muslim-majority countries, but this does not appear to be the case. Relations with these countries are based solely on common commercial interests. India follows the same pattern in engaging with various countries, irrespective of the nature of their governments. Thus, rather than forging alliances with ideologically like-minded countries, India prefers to establish bilateral, multilateral and plurilateral partnerships around a particular interest or issue. What Samir Saran calls "match clubs" (Saran, 2015: 624), groupings where there is room for manoeuvring and flexibility in decision-making.

India's foreign policy is also not devoid of ideas or values, although they do not systematically guide its actions. Preferences tend to be established with countries that have gone through a similar

historical experience, such as countries that were part of the Non-Aligned Movement and those of the G-77 (Menon, 2021): 301), thus maintaining the interest and need to promote a multilateral order. Governments in New Delhi have shown a preference for a multiactor system, in an egalitarian order, without hierarchies and hegemonies, rules-based (inspired by international law), democratic and pluralistic, and with a multidirectional policy.

India's relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan falls within the immediate neighbourhood policy (*Neighbourhood First policy*), whilst Iran and the Persian Gulf countries are considered the extended neighbourhood. With Pakistan, however, there are hardly any bilateral relations left. The trauma of Partition, the wars fought between the two countries and the use of jihadism to attack India by groups supported by Pakistan, under its strategy of reclaiming Kashmir, have exhausted the path of dialogue. Pakistan's behaviour has, in fact, contributed to the negative image of Muslims in India, who are condemned by virtue of their religion without having been party to their actions.

1.1 India and Islam: centuries of heavily politicised history

The debate on the relationship between India and Islam is a complex one. Centuries of history between the first arrival of Arab traders in the 8th century on the west coast of Malabar, to the invasions from the west and Central Asia, introduced religion by trade and conquest, respectively.

Myths about Islam and its role in Indian history are manifold. The most common message is that of the violence of conquest, pillage, conversions by force and the power of the sword. Much of this account ignores other realities, such as the gradual introduction of religion into the native population, integrating it into the social fabric over time (Ballesteros Peiró, 2013: 120). But as Amartya Sen argues, this appropriation of history serves the interests of the *Sangh Parivar*¹ group to portray India as inherently Hindu, ignoring history. In addition to wanting to prevail politically, socially this ideology provides popular support through various socialisation programmes and recruitment of citizens into

¹ The *Sangh Parivar* alludes to the RSS family (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* or National Volunteer Union) under which the various ideologically related groups are united, such as the BJP, the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (World Council of Hindus, VHP) and affiliated trade unions, student groups and activists.

hindutva, a particularly relevant element among the Indian diaspora (Sen, 2005: 43).

This ideology sees India not just as a Hindu-majority country, but as a country with an exclusive identity, and it is Muslims who are the target of a branding that marks them as outsiders. These ideas were already circulating in the 19th century, but with the BJP coming to power, they have become the norm. Hinduism, however, does not have a unified structure or a universally accepted set of holy books (Andersen and Damle, 2019: 77). There are multiple practices and understandings of religion. The term became popular with the publishing of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's book *Hindutva* in 1923. *Who is a Hindu?* The idea emphasises the unity of Hindus and their cohesion, according to which in India, as a homeland and sacred land, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs fit alongside Hindus, since their religions were born in the land, whilst Christians and Muslims do not, since their religions have their origins in other countries.

The legacy of India's partition at independence has punished Muslims. On the one hand, the creation of Pakistan on the basis of Muslim nationalism led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah at the head of the Muslim League left suspicions about his allegiance. However, it ignores the fact that, for many Muslims in India, the country's separation was a betrayal (Ahmed, 2019: 14). Jinnah is presented as the villain behind India's territorial division and strategic weakening. In the words of Savarkar:

"The new Islamic enemies not only aspired to crush Hindu political power... they also had a fierce religious ambition... millions of Muslim invaders from all over Asia descended on India, century after century, with all the ferocity of their mandate to destroy Hinduism, which was the soul of the nation..." (Savarkar quoted by Sarkar, 2001: 156).

However, there is no evidence that they were fanatical, and it is not known if the dynasties became Indianised, with patronage to Hindu religious institutions and inclusion of Hindu members within the Mughal courts.

Similarly, the view promoted is that Muslims are separatists hopelessly conditioned by the dictates of a static and inflexible religion. However, this ignores the role of figures like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan or Abdul Kalam Azad, who worked for a united India and rejected its division along religious lines. From 1947 onwards, Muslims were assumed to be supportive of Pakistan in contrast to



the reality, which is an acceptance of India and a range of multiple identities that do not necessarily have Islam as their sole source. Moreover, to believe that Muslims in India identify more with the neighbouring or Middle Eastern countries ignores the multiplicity of identity factors, such as social class, caste (which determines occupation and social stratification), region of residence, language, gender or political ideology.

The turn of the 20th century, the eruption of Islamism and the impact of the 9/11 attacks added further tension to this coexistence. With each terrorist attack by Pakistan-backed groups such as the Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) or the Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), the

responsibility fell on Indian Muslims, who are made unwitting participants or accomplices in their neighbour's designs. Attacks such as those on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 or in Mumbai (2008), increasingly polarised the population against Muslims, facilitating the popularity of the *hindutva* discourse.

2 Pakistan: the world through the prism of identity and the vetoed entry to Afghanistan

The creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 divided Indian territory, as shown in map 1, and the territorial claim over Kashmir marked the bilateral relationship from a confrontational stance. Unlike India, Pakistan came under the Western sphere during the Cold War. Its aim was to obtain a patron strong enough to help it counterbalance conventional Indian power.

At the regional level, Pakistan's opposition to India's hegemony in South Asia has ideational roots that have made the zero-sum game an impediment to cooperation, not only within the neighbourhood but also in other Asian regions, such as West Asia or the Middle East. In the case of the Gulf States, Pakistan has traditionally sought to isolate India based on Islamic religious affiliation. Likewise, proximity to other US allies has kept Pakistan connected to generous patrons who have financed an unstable economy, heavily burdened by mismanagement and the centrality of the ideological (anti-Indian) element in Pakistan's foreign policy.

2.1 Traditional rivalry: a three-pronged strategy

Pakistan and India have clashed at least four times (1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999) in wars, all due to instigation by the military establishment in Rawalpindi, and all ended in defeat. According to Zionts' definition, an irrational revisionist State is one that is unable to revise its policy against the *status quo*, despite having suffered a significant defeat (Zionts, 2006). In seeking means to counter India's military power over itself, this *establishment* sought first, as previously mentioned, the backing of a strong ally and, subsequently, the creation of unconventional forces to wage a hybrid-type opposition against India. The first experience took place shortly after independence, when Pakistan infiltrated thousands of insurgents across the border to take Kashmir by force in October 1947, calling the operation *jihad* under the command

of an officer, Akbar Khan, who took the *nom de guerre* of Tariq (after Tariq bin Ziyad), leading the “liberation forces” (Haqqani, 2005): 29).

The establishment’s obsession with India and its monopoly on defence and foreign policy has prevented it from maintaining a functional bilateral relationship, although there have been episodes of concord. Much of Pakistan’s strategic culture is based on threat perception. Throughout history, the Pakistan Army has deployed five main India-centric narratives that prevail in the strategic culture:

1. The presumption that India does not accept the two-nation theory.
2. The certainty that Pakistan is the only country capable of holding India back in its hegemonic pretensions.
3. Belief that India started all the wars with Pakistan.
4. The conviction that India is not the superpower it thinks it is, minimising its power because “it is Hindu”.
5. The principle that India is at the root of Pakistan’s security problems (Fair, 2014: 136-137).

Part of the principles that formed Pakistan contained in the two-nation theory (Hindus one, Muslims the other) is called the “ideology of Pakistan”. This ideology is monopolised by the Army, which has claimed responsibility for defending the country’s physical and ideological borders. The first military leader to add ideological boundaries as a factor to be defended was General Yahya Khan (1969-1971), under whose rule the eastern half —which became Bangladesh— was lost.

Thus, Islam was seen as the backbone of the country. The military’s instrumental use of religion has at least three objectives: 1) as a way to unify the country by providing an ideology that is above ethnic or provincial affiliations; 2) to mobilise and prepare the population for war and justify its large budget; and 3) to motivate soldiers by spreading the idea that Islam confers supernatural advantages on them (Fair, 2014: 86).

Whilst Pakistan has traditionally linked the bilateral relationship to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, seeking to internationalise it and calling for a referendum under UN Resolution 47, India’s traditional position has been to view the dispute as bilaterally negotiable and, more recently, as an exclusively internal matter. This shift became final following the revocation in August 2019 of

the special status of the Indian-administered part of the territory, which was enshrined in Article 370 of the Constitution.

Given its poor relationship with Afghanistan and India, Pakistan needed to appease one of its borders in order to focus on gaining Kashmiri territory. The idea of strategic depth was to cultivate a like-minded government in Kabul that would neutralise the independence demands of national minorities such as the Pashtuns and Baloch and keep India away from its rear, given that successive Afghan governments have rejected the border known as the Durand line and claim the majority Pashtun populated areas in Pakistani territory.

For Pakistan, the focus remained on Kashmir, with the strategy centred on cultivating irregular forces and promoting Islamism. In the 1950s and 1960s, to neutralise Kabul's claim to Pashtunistan, the Ayub Khan government and Pakistani intelligence agencies harboured Islamist leaders and groups persecuted by the Afghan government in their territory. These groups found refuge in Pakistan and established alliances with like-minded parties (*Jama'at-e Islami* and *Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam*), with the aim of one day seizing power in Kabul. For its part, India saw these alliances as an encroachment on Afghan sovereignty.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) fostered Islamist alliances through intelligence services to gain greater influence in Afghanistan in 1973, through Pakistan's Foreign Office, where an Afghan cell was created to organise various Islamist groups under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani (Haqqani, 2005: 104). Bhutto used the idea of a domino effect in Asia by exaggerating the perceived danger posed to Pakistan by the USSR before it invaded Afghanistan and thus secured US military aid. Thus, in 1973, training camps were established in the two tribal agencies of Waziristan, where paramilitary units of the Federally Administered Agencies' Frontier Corps, commanded by Pakistani Army Officers, were engaged in training Afghans who had escaped Daoud Khan's anti-Islamist repression following his 1973 *coup d'état* (Fair, 2014: 121). From 1975 onwards, Pakistan backed a series of insurgencies in Kabul, encouraging further repression and a greater exodus of Afghan Islamism. It is estimated that between 1973 and 1977, about five thousand militants were trained in Pakistani territory (*ibid.*: 122).

With the Soviet invasion and the arrival of US and Saudi economic, military and arms aid, Pakistan channelled some of that aid into

irregular forces geared to fighting India in Kashmir, which formed links with the Afghan jihad. Groups such as the Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM) are a legacy of this policy. However, with the mujahideen groups unable to share power in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal and the ensuing civil war, Pakistan saw the Taliban as a new bargaining chip to keep India out of its backyard.

The ascendancy of Al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks inspired LeT and JeM to expand their attacks into the rest of India's territory as well, further deteriorating relations to the point of severing them. The impact of the attacks generated a growing rejection among the Indian population of the rapprochement with Pakistan. Modi, after winning his first term in office in 2014, considered approaching Nawaz Sharif's government, in whom he found an ally for peace; his surprise visit to Lahore in December 2015 was key, as he came from Afghanistan, with which India was forging closer ties. The Sharif-Modi goodwill ended a few days later, when a Kashmiri terrorist group (with suspected JeM backing) killed eight Indian soldiers at the Pathankot airbase. Since then, Modi has not reached out again.

2.2 Taliban 2.0? The Indian position

There is a tendency to underestimate the importance of Afghanistan and see it only through the prism of conflict. Although landlocked, it is a hinge State between three Asian subregions: Central, South and West Asia. Its strategic importance is therefore key for the Asian continent (Kugelman, 2022: 232) and connectivity between these subregions.

India and Pakistan's enmity has been evident in their relations with Afghanistan. Whilst India supported the Soviets during the invasion, Pakistan and the United States were employed to back the mujahideen. India was close to Mohammed Najibullah's government after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. However, given the strong Pakistani influence, the Narasimha Rao government decided to reach out to various factions, regardless of their ideology or closeness to Pakistan (Choudhury, 2019). Similarly, India was conducting a rapprochement with the Taliban. For them, India was an option to balance Pakistan's overdependence.

The past, in this sense, does not define present relationships. Between 1996 and 2000, India supported the anti-Taliban forces

of the Northern Alliance or the United Front, especially Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces, without recognising the movement, as Pakistan did. After the dissolution of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and the rise of the Afghan Republic in 2001, rivalry with Pakistan brought New Delhi closer, and it invested in development aid and infrastructure, especially in the Pashtun-majority areas of the country, as a way to win over the population and its leaders and to keep Pakistan on edge about its role in Afghan territory (*ibid.*). Also, thanks to the Indian government, Afghanistan joined the South Asian regional partnership in 2007 (Kugelman, 2022: 234).

India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement and a Preferential Trade Agreement in 2011, making India the largest investor in the region and the fifth largest globally (Brookings 2017). India was responsible for the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway, the Salma Dam and the Parliament building, as well as generously investing in education (building schools and providing scholarships). India, moreover, became an admired and respected country in Afghanistan during those twenty years, in stark contrast to Pakistan, which was shunned for its interference and support for the Taliban (D'Souza 2011). The Indian government also offered military training to the Afghan Armed Forces and Police, as well as weapons, albeit in a limited capacity. If India and Afghanistan have not strengthened their bilateral relationship, it has been due to the lack of a direct channel of communication, as the Pakistani government has consistently refused to grant transit rights.

In light of the Afghan Republic governments' hostility towards Islamabad, Pakistan continued to cultivate the Taliban's return to power and, since 2014, began construction of a fence along the border with Afghanistan. However, whilst Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban, it also fought against its own. The Tehrike Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged around 2007 as a result of discontent with the military government of Pervez Musharraf, both over its alliance with the United States and the attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad, whose leaders had challenged the government to impose *Sharia* as state law. The bombing of the mosque and the subsequent deaths of hundreds of insurgents and students generated a wave of rejection that materialised in the founding of the TTP.

Precisely, the TTP poisoned Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan after the retaking of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021, following the withdrawal of international troops and the Doha Accords. The attacks have been constant and the *de facto* Afghan gov-

ernment seems to have no interest in ending their activities on Afghan soil. Violence in Pakistan has increased by 56% in 2023 (Ballesteros Peiró, 2025), whose government, increasingly frustrated with Afghanistan, is proceeding to expel Afghan refugees on its territory, including those with regularised status and decades of residence.

India is approaching Afghanistan cautiously, even with reluctance, given the ideological nature of the Taliban regime. Even so, in January 2025, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and acting Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met in Dubai, taking advantage of the two countries' good relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to discuss various issues. It is a wake-up call on the various changing dynamics in the region (*ibid.*); in particular, Afghanistan's importance for India as a gateway to Central Asia and the usefulness of India's relationship with West Asia, especially the importance of connectivity with Iran and the geo-economic importance of the Gulf Arab countries.

3 The importance of the Persian Gulf

India's policy, as mentioned above, changed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with which India was not formally aligned, but it shared the aforesaid 1971 Treaty (also in response to the alignment of the United States and China, India's main rival and to which it lost a war in 1962)². From the 1990s onwards, India focused on its economic development, for which access to the energy markets of the Gulf, a region that is close and easily accessible by sea, was a priority.

As India has become more confident in its international interactions, its ability to reach out to countries with which it previously had little contact has increased. In the case of the Gulf States, Pakistan's traditional closeness has kept India relatively aloof in the past. However, governments in New Delhi have shifted from seeing these countries as a set of semi-feudal petro-States, promoters of instability and various Islamisms (Mohan, 2020), to potential allies.

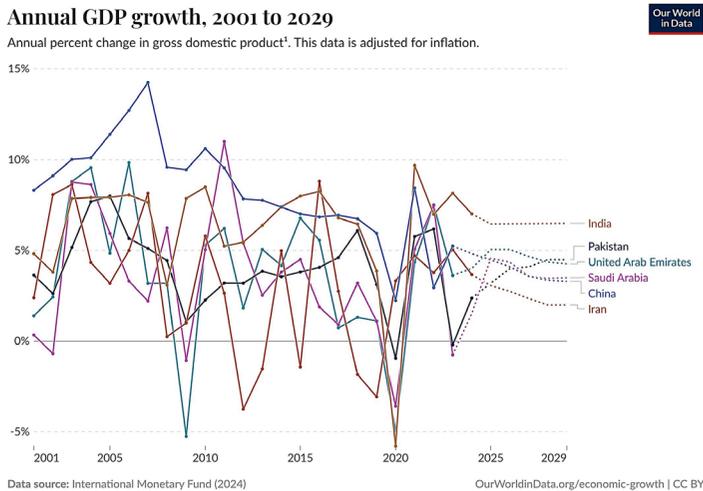
In addition to economic needs, there are also regional pressures. The conflict between India and China along the border accentu-

² Please refer also to Arrieta Ruiz's chapter on this book for more details on India's role in the Gulf.

ates the competition in the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2023: 89). Similarly, in order to avoid the negative effects of the great global competition between the United States and China, India is looking for a third way, although an alternative system to the growing bipolarity has not yet been defined (Menon, 2023).

It is precisely in this scenario that India has developed its West Asia-oriented policy (*look west*), under which the Gulf States are defined as part of the extended neighbourhood. This vision was initiated during Singh’s tenure and accelerated by Vajpayee based on the need to secure access to other energy markets and sources (Tandon, 2016: 353; Menon, 2021: 227). China’s recent access to this maritime area, where India once prevailed due to its privileged position, has increased competition between the two countries for access to the Gulf’s resources and to ensure the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

The formulation of this “westward-looking” policy aligns economic necessity and commercial expansion, under concepts of the national role that Holsti defines as a subsystem leader (South Asia), active independent and partisan-liberator (Ashwarya, 2023: 584). Moreover, India is seen as a peaceful mediator, avoiding the formation of alliances and compromises with the great powers (Holsti, 1970: 280). To this Nehruvian-inspired role, the reformulation that has been transforming Indian geopolitical visions since



1. **Gross domestic product:** Gross domestic product (GDP) is a measure of a country’s economic performance. It represents the total monetary value of all final goods and services produced within its borders over a specific time period, typically annually or quarterly. GDP includes consumption, government spending, investments, and net exports (exports minus imports). It can be measured in current prices (nominal GDP) or adjusted for inflation to reflect GDP in constant prices (real GDP). GDP is used to gauge the health of an economy, with increases indicating growth and decreases signaling contraction. Policymakers, economists, and analysts use GDP to make informed decisions, track economic trends, and make comparisons between countries.

the 1990s must be added. As a re-articulation of its geographical representations, India has moved from being a non-aligned country to one that, as mentioned above, presents leadership characteristics, whilst retaining features of the more Nehruvian traditional strategic discourse (Mohan, 2019: 306).

This Indian shift is in line with other global changes. On one hand, a shift in US priorities which, in turn, has generated a reaction in the Indo-Pacific region. President Obama's pivot towards Asia went hand in hand with a reluctance on the part of the US to continue acting as a security guarantor for its Gulf partner countries. The fall of longstanding allies, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, generated insecurities among other leaders in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring protests (2010-2011). Fatigue from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led to a refusal to intervene in Syria, despite President Bashar al-Assad crossing the red line that Obama had identified as the trigger for a backlash. The perceived withdrawal from the Middle East, together with the signing of the P5+1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, heralded the intention to close the Iranian chapter in order to focus on other priorities.

Whilst under President Donald Trump, the Saudi leadership's fears of a lack of reaction to the Houthi attacks on Aramco's oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula were allayed, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries took a more proactive approach to their own self-defence. It was thus clear that the doctrine of security and protection of energy facilities that the US had guaranteed for decades to its Gulf Arab partners had changed (Al-Saif, 2024). From the Gulf States' need for self-sufficiency to India's doctrine of strategic autonomy, a convergence of interests was established.

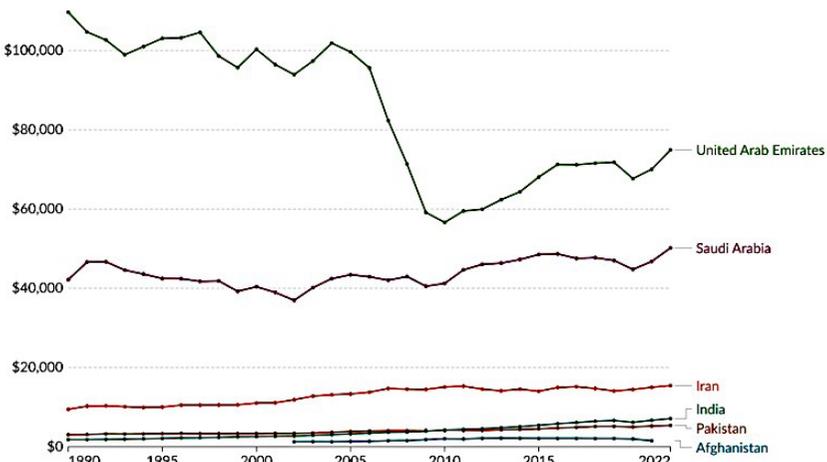
3.1 What economics unites, ideology does not separate.

India is the world's fifth largest economy, set to become the third largest by the end of the 2030s, ahead of Japan and Germany and just behind the United States and China (García Herrero and Ketels, 2023). India has significantly improved the dynamism and openness of its economy compared to previous years. As Figure 1 shows, it is one of the few countries that maintains high economic growth, which, despite a slowdown in the last year, has remained at 7% per annum (according to the IMF for 2024). In contrast, Pakistan has grown by 2.4%. The country that showed

the lowest growth in 2024 was Saudi Arabia (1.5%), but if we take into account its GDP per capita (Figure 2), the impact is lower than in Pakistan (USD 50,188 for Saudi Arabia and USD 5377 for Pakistan). China’s growth has slowed (4.8%), the UAE (4%) follows at a similar pace and Iran, despite sanctions, maintains a growth of 3.7%.

GDP per capita

This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in the cost of living between countries.



Data source: World Bank (2023)

OurWorldinData.org/economic-growth | CC BY

Note: This data is expressed in international-\$¹ at 2017 prices.

1. International dollars: International dollars are a hypothetical currency that is used to make meaningful comparisons of monetary indicators of living standards. Figures expressed in international dollars are adjusted for inflation within countries over time, and for differences in the cost of living between countries. The goal of such adjustments is to provide a unit whose purchasing power is held fixed over time and across countries, such that one international dollar can buy the same quantity and quality of goods and services no matter where or when it is spent. Read more in our article: What are Purchasing Power Parity adjustments and why do we need them?

Relations between India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are oriented towards what they call a pragmatic vision, free of ideology and normative interference in their own affairs. It is in this scenario that Indian policy fits in whilst Pakistani policy misses the mark. In the Gulf countries, India finds partners with whom it can diversify its markets and provide alternatives to secure the SLOCs through which its energy and trade flows. In the other direction, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are able to diversify their energy exports to the world’s fifth largest economy, whilst gaining cheap labour, collaboration in the construction of connectivity infrastructures and diversification of their economies. National interest and stability are the conditions for their development, as reflected in their respective 2030 visions (2035 in Kuwait’s case), which emphasise transnational issues such as climate change, artificial intelligence and technology.

India has signed a framework agreement and a cooperation agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council and is negotiating a free trade agreement. With the UAE, India signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in 2022, as well as a strategic security partnership, a trilateral dialogue joined by France (UFI) and the I2U2 (India, Israel, US and UAE), a precursor partnership to what later became the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). It also maintains a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation with the UAE signed in September 2024 for cooperation in civil nuclear energy.

	Exports		Imports	
	Expressed in millions of dollars.	Total percentage	Expressed in millions of dollars.	Total percentage
Afghanistan	355.45	0.08	642.29	0.09
Pakistan	1188.85	0.27	2.88	0.00
Iran	1222.20	0.28	625.14	0.09
UAE	35 - 625.02	8.15	48 - 025.58	7.08
Saudi Arabia	11 - 558.57	2.64	31 - 416.37	4.6
Qatar	1700	0.39	12 - 342.5	1.81
Kuwait	2103.22	0.48	8362.82	1.23
Oman	4426.47	1.01	4502.89	0.12
Bahrain	9094	0.20	829.4	0.12

Table 1. India Trade (2023-2024). *Source: Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry*

The dissonance with Pakistan is clear. Whilst it remains anchored in revisionism and its competition with India, ideology and transactionalism have ultimately affected its relations with the Gulf and other allies, especially under Imran Khan's government (2018-2022). Political instability is damaging Pakistan's economy, with the resulting loss of partners and increasing dependence on Chinese investment (Haqqani, 2022).

The ideological transition of these States is also reflected in the minimisation of the impact of regional conflicts, as demonstrated by the signing of the Abraham Accords. Whilst the rhetoric of the Riyadh and Abu Dhabi governments emphasises the need for "reconciliation" and de-escalation, Pakistan still does not recognise Israel, something India did in 1950, although it did not establish full diplomatic ties until 1992. Both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates,

despite being traditional allies, have distanced themselves from Pakistan, both for their own interests and as a result of the exhaustion of the dynamics that the Islamabad government imposes on their international relations. India has entered this region in earnest and Pakistan will have a hard time keeping it out.

India's importance for the Gulf markets and its economic and political clout is evident. In addition to the normative aspect (respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs), the relationship with the region also involves a geopolitical imperative characterised by the fact that "the absence of certain resources leads to the establishment of alliances with countries that have them at their disposal" (Dijkink, 1998: 294). Geo-economics, therefore, is the main motivation for India to approach these countries.

These interactions also take place through cultural and historical symbols, as demonstrated by a telling example: the participation of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj in the 46th summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Abu Dhabi in March 2019. The invitation came directly from Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, who was himself a guest of honour at the Indian Republic Day parade in New Delhi two years ago.

The last invitation to the OIC annual meeting to India was extended by Morocco in 1969. However, despite containing the world's third largest Muslim population after Indonesia and Pakistan, the delegation was unable to attend because of opposition from the Islamabad government. Indeed, the neighbouring country has repeatedly refused India's entry into this forum, despite having the backing of countries such as Saudi Arabia, which proposed in 2006 that India join the organisation as an observer, or Bangladesh in 2018, which also called for reforms to include India as an observer (Khatu, 2019).

The Emirati invitation came in the wake of the wave of solidarity towards India following the February 2019 terror attack, in which a military convoy was attacked by JeM in the Kashmir district of Pulwama, killing 46 Indian soldiers. Whilst India secured international backing, Pakistan received *opprobrium*. Consequently, its foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, did not attend the summit in protest at India's presence. Another sign of international dissatisfaction with support for irregular strategies came in May of the same year when China lifted its four-time veto against the inclusion of Masood Azhar, leader of the JeM, on the UN Security Committee's sanctions list on ISIL, Al-Qaeda and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities.

3.2 Iran vis-à-vis the rest of the region

India's relationship with Iran has been marked by the Islamic past of the Safavid and Mughal empires, whose exchanges maintained the idea of closeness, not only geographically but also culturally. The language of the Mughal court was Persian, which disappeared from the northern administration when the British established English as the official medium of communication. In the 20th century, Iran's position in the Western axis, with its alignment with Pakistan in the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), did not fit in well with the non-alignment pursued by the Nehru government.

Although there was no contact after the 1979 Revolution, successive Iranian governments saw India as an alternative to alleviate the impact of US sanctions (Soltaninejad, 2023: 62). In 2001, President Mohammad Khatami and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on their visit to Iran signed a strategic partnership through the Tehran Declaration. Two years later, the New Delhi Declaration was signed during the Iranian President's visit to India. The main areas of interest were access to the Iranian energy market, the importance of developing connectivity infrastructures between the two countries, as well as the interest in entering Central Asia, increasing the importance of Afghanistan (*ibid*: 64).

Country of residence	Indian citizens*. (2024):	Percentage of total remittances received (2020):
Bahrain	327,807	-
Iran	10,765	-
Kuwait	995,528	2.4%
Oman	686,635	1.6%
Qatar	836,784	1.5%
Saudi Arabia	2,463,509	5.1%
UAE	3- 68,848	18%

Table 2. Indian population in the Persian Gulf and remittances. Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India (www.mea.gov.in) and Reserve Bank of India (*Includes non-residents and persons of Indian origin)

However, the weight of sanctions imposed in 2005 following the discovery of Iran's nuclear programme has slowed India's rapprochement with Iran, with diminished potential for both countries. It is necessary to understand that the New Delhi government

may or may not approve of the nature of the Tehran government, but it will not cease to establish relations with it. Whilst Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in July 1968 and ratified it in February 1970 (Rassouli, 2015: 50), neither India nor Pakistan are signatories, both being *de facto* nuclear powers. For India, the NPT is seen as an instrument that divides the world into those who had nuclear weapons and those who did not, creating a nuclear elite (Sarkar and Ganguly, 2018), referring to the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council.

For the US, it has been necessary to cultivate India's loyalty and keep it away from Iran through incentives that demonstrate that its bilateral relationship could be more beneficial than that with Tehran. The 2008 nuclear deal with the US was intended to distance India from Iran, even though it is not a signatory to the NPT. Whilst after the signing of the JCPOA, India and Iran's rapprochement increased, doubling oil and gas purchases in the first year after the lifting of sanctions alone (Soltaninejad, 2023: 68) and with investment in the Shahid Beheshti terminal in the port of Chabahar being at the heart of the relationship. After the port, the construction of a railway to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia was discussed during the 2016 visit, although the arrival of President Donald Trump in the White House truncated this rapprochement. Nevertheless, Iran and India signed a ten-year agreement in May 2024 to further develop the port with the Indian port authorities (Indian Ports Global Limited, IPGL) and Iran.

Sanctions aside, one reason why India attaches less importance to Iran compared to other Gulf countries is related to the Indian diaspora. The growing number of Indian nationals abroad has become a foreign policy priority. According to data from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs website in November 2024, the total number of Indian nationals abroad (209 countries) aggregated 35,421,987 persons. As Table 1 shows, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have a high number of Indian citizens, and India focuses its interest on them as a priority. In fact, the UAE is the country with the second largest number of Indian citizens in the world, after the United States, with Saudi Arabia in fourth place behind Canada.

In terms of the economic value of the diaspora, according to World Bank data, India is the largest recipient of remittances in the world, surpassing China or Mexico, receiving a total of USD 89,127 million between 2021 and 2022. The largest source coun-

try is the United States (23.4% of total remittances), followed by Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa, which together account for 30% of the total. The second region in importance is the Gulf, with 28% of total remittances, headed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (RBI, 2022).

The importance of these countries is reflected in Narendra Modi's speeches during his official visits. According to Henrikson, visits "represent the international relationship that is most worthy of attention" (quoted in Flint, 2006: 56). Modi travelled to ten Middle Eastern countries on fourteen occasions between 2014 and 2023 (out of a total of 133 foreign trips according to the official PM India website), of which the Gulf is listed as the main destination. Of the remainder, 62 were made to 26 countries in Asia (Japan as the main destination and other countries in the near neighbourhood and Southeast Asia).

The contrast with Iran, as compared to the GCC countries, is evident in the concepts present in the Indian prime minister's speeches. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, between 2014 and 2022, Modi made two visits to Saudi Arabia (2016 and 2019), one to Iran (2016), one to Qatar (2016) and four visits to the UAE (2015, 2018, 2019 and 2022). According to an analysis of speeches in these countries (see Figure 1), it can be observed that India is one of the most frequently cited words, given that these visits are mainly aimed at increasing reputation and transforming its image in this region.

Modi addresses all countries using terms such as brothers, friends and neighbours, emphasising the maritime connections that have brought them together for centuries. The centrality of security is shared with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, especially regarding maritime trade. Relationships are defined under terms such as trade, development, markets, growth, investment and the way to reach these agreements is cooperation, partnerships, bilaterally, by mutual agreement, inclusively and under mutually beneficial arrangements.

Modi mentions security and terrorism in the Saudi case fifteen and fourteen times respectively, whilst in the case of the UAW it is thirteen and eleven respectively. In the MOUs signed bilaterally with India, counterterrorism is one of the priorities, but in Modi's case, this is presented in benign terms, through cooperation, development and connectivity 'to shape new pathways to peace and prosperity' (Press Information Bureau, 2016). It is not lost

on Iran. However, India does not renounce the importance of the North-South transport corridor through Iran and Afghanistan to Central Asia and Russia.

4 Conclusions

Hindutva ideology has not slowed India's projection among its Muslim neighbours. Whilst the idea of civilisation permeates foreign relations through the use of terms such as *vishwaguru*, the Islamic legacy itself is used in an instrumental and differentiated way in its domestic and foreign policies. Although the emphasis in relations with West Asia is on economics and more pragmatic interests, India sometimes uses Islam as a means of connecting with the Gulf States.

In the case of Minister Swaraj's speech at the OIC, where she did not once mention Pakistan directly, quoting: "[...] including more than 185 million Muslims brothers and sisters. Our Muslim brothers and sisters are a microcosm of the diversity of India itself [...] they practice their beliefs and live in harmony with each other and with their non-Muslim brethren, [...] which has prevented Muslims in India from falling prey to the poisonous propaganda of radical and extremist ideologies"³.

There are also other specific cultural connections, as in Figure 1, with which Modi congratulated Muhammad Bin Salman's birthday with a reference to the arrival of Islam in India in the 8th century in Kerala. Through the figure of King Cheraman Perumal, who trav-



³ Refer to *Times of India*. India addresses OIC for first time, says terrorism destroying lives, destabilising regions. [Accessed: 01 March 2019. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indiaaddressesoicforfirsttimesaysterrorismdestroyingdestroyinglivesdestabilisingregions/articleshow/68218471.cms>

elled to Mecca, one of the first Indian converts who built what is believed to be the first mosque in India (Ballesteros Peiró, 2013: 124), a soft power is projected that connects with the Gulf and neutralises Pakistan's accusation of Islamophobia against the Indian government. Quotes in this style attempt to wash away the less friendly face of *hindutva* and are especially useful for reaching out to Gulf partners, even if they are more the exception than the rule.

The moment of India's rise, moreover, is shown in the number of relations and contacts established with actors of various kinds, the only exception being Pakistan. Whilst India has exhausted political avenues, even if diplomacy continues to be pursued, Pakistan's ideological nature makes it difficult to adopt a more pragmatic relationship. The possibility of the opening of a dual front, PakistanChina, continues to affect New Delhi's calculations as it seeks other actors to facilitate its access to the resources necessary to acquire the economic status that will establish it as a global power. To this end, its rapprochement with the United States is key, but India will continue to seek agreements with all kinds of actors, including those who have traditionally been on the opposing side.

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CHAPTER SIX

India beyond the Indo-Pacific: from the Global South to the Arctic

Andrea Arrieta Ruiz

Abstract

The echo of a civilisation that in the past shaped universal thought is resurfacing today with renewed force. India, traditionally embedded in a moral leadership based on non-alignment, has reconfigured its foreign policy to adapt to a changing international system. Under the Narendra Modi government, the country has expanded its influence beyond the Indo-Pacific, establishing strategic alliances in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the Arctic. This evolution responds both to the need to balance the rise of rival powers such as China, and to the ambition to establish itself as a key player in 21st century geopolitics. This chapter examines how India transitions from a regional power to a global actor, redefining the boundaries of its influence on the international stage.

Keywords

India, Global South, Outreach, Geopolitics, Bilateral relations, Strategy, Security.

1 India's global resurgence

The distant whisper of a bygone civilisation, which was forged as one of the roots of universal thought and human history, emerges again today as a timeless echo. India presents itself as an actor whose influence transcends the boundaries of its immediate geographical environment. Its foreign policy, marked in the past by the idealism of non-alignment in a world divided by the Cold War, has evolved to respond to an international system that has been transformed by a new power dynamic.

What was once a moral leadership exercised from the margins of the global system now translates into a strategy of international scope that combines ambition and pragmatism. Under the Narendra Modi government, India has forged partnerships beyond Asia, projecting its presence into regions such as Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the Arctic.

This chapter analyses how these initiatives not only seek to counter the advance of rival powers, such as China, but also to position India as a key player in 21st century global power-shaping, blurring the boundaries between regional leadership and global influence.

2 The Global South

The birth of the concept of the *Global South* dates back to the late 1990s —after the end of the Cold War— and is closely linked to the term *Third World*. This emerged a few years earlier as an expression of the confrontation between capitalist and communist societies and the international scene dominated by a first world made up of the representatives of each bloc: United States and the Soviet Union. In this sense, it was then also possible to identify a set of countries that formed part of what was considered the second world and other developing countries located mainly in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania that made up the Third World (Chakrabarti, 2016: 1912).

However, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the confrontational blocs that served as a point of reference for the construction of these concepts made it impossible to continue considering this worldview, at least in the terms in which it had been initially conceived. This prompted the transformation of the concept of *Third World* to *Global South*, the latter, a term of metaphorical character, whose use is more frequent today (Kloß, 2017: 3).

The south was already a significant category in the 1970s, especially because of its economic and commercial potential, an issue that was reflected in initiatives such as the Bandung Conference (1955) or the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the international influence of groups such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) or the G77. However, the “Global” heading was added later to avoid confining the concept to a geographical factor, since it is actually intended to highlight an inequality in global power relations, including other concepts such as imperialism or neo-colonialism. In this way, the Global South emphasises a shared legacy round histories of colonisation and structural inequalities, as well as common economic challenges. Far from implying hierarchies, the concept highlights a collective identity within the international system (Moore, 2018: 863) and situates the countries included in it as the most exploited and oppressed in the processes of neoliberal globalisation. This framework is used by countries in the Global South to try to maximise their territorial sovereignty and international status.

Within this context, India, aware of these historical links and the need for cooperation, has adopted an active diplomacy towards the Global South —considered by many analysts as a clear reflection of its *realpolitik*— to strengthen strategic partnerships with key countries in Africa and Latin America. This is reflected in initiatives such as the virtual *Voice of Global South Summit*, which took place in 2023 and was inspired by Modi’s vision of *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas*¹ and the Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*².

In Africa, it is deepening its relations with partners such as South Africa and Nigeria, and in Latin America it is establishing partnerships with Brazil, Mexico and Argentina in strategic sectors such as energy, technology and security. This orientation not only positions India as a leader in the Global South, but also reinforces an agenda of growth and collaboration in the face of the pre-eminence of traditional powers.

2.1 Africa: an expanding strategic relationship

India’s historical presence in Africa, particularly in the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean, has been of great significance in both

¹ This political slogan in Hindi promoted by Modi can be translated as “Together with everybody, development for everybody, trust in everybody and effort by everybody”.

² Hindu philosophical concept meaning “The world is one family”.

commercial and cultural terms. This link goes back to ancient times, when communities of Indian origin were established in various regions of the African coast of the Indian Ocean. Over the centuries, the relationship between the two has been marked by trade exchanges, which have intensified in recent years with a growing Indian presence in Africa, both in economic and security terms. In this regard, the Indian diaspora (Figure 5) on the African continent is estimated at three million people, with a significant concentration in the countries of the eastern seaboard.

As India positions itself as a key global player, its foreign, security and defence policy has focused on the Indo-Pacific region, of which East Africa forms a key strategic part. In this regard, India's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy identifies the maritime space from Southeast Asia to the eastern coasts of Africa as a priority area for its security. This area includes island nations such as Madagascar, the Seychelles, Comoros and Mauritius, as well as countries on the African coast such as South Africa and Nigeria, places of vital importance for India's power projection in the region.

India's interest in Africa is multidimensional, encompassing both maritime security and access to key natural resources. Africa is home to important "choke points" and transit routes for oil, minerals and other products essential to the Indian economy. Of particular interest are Cape Horn and the Strait of Hormuz, which are critical areas for energy supplies. In this context, India has increased its investment in infrastructure on the African continent, working on joint projects with other international actors such as Japan and the United States. An example of this is the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), launched in 2017, which seeks to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and consolidate connectivity between the two continents through quality infrastructure, limiting China's influence in the region (Baruah, 2020: 13).

Infrastructure building has also been a pillar of the India-Africa relationship. Since 2006, India has been driving the creation of the Pan-African e-Network, a telecommunications network that connects 47 African countries, including educational centres, hospitals and other key infrastructures. In addition, in the field of health, India has carried out a number of humanitarian aid and medical cooperation initiatives, including the delivery of supplies and transfer of medical technology to several African countries, particularly in the Indian Ocean region.

On the other hand, increasing competition with China in Africa is an important factor in India's strategy in the region. The expansion of Chinese investment in infrastructure, finance and trade has increased the rivalry between the two powers. China's establishment of its base in Djibouti, which emphasises the strategic importance of the Mozambique Channel, south of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, also stands out in this regard, making the western coast of the Indian Ocean an arena of competition between the two. India, aware of this challenge, has tried to strengthen its presence through bilateral agreements with countries such as South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya and the development of multilateralism, as demonstrated by the organisation of the India-Africa Summit in 2008 and successive high-level meetings.

In terms of security, India has intensified its cooperation with several African countries, especially in the Horn of Africa and the island nations of the Indian Ocean. The recent construction of military bases for surveillance and monitoring in countries such as the Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar and the Seychelles underlines the growing strategic importance of the region for India. This deployment has not only a security component, but also an economic one, as India seeks to secure key trade routes and counter threats such as terrorism, transnational crime and piracy.

India's presence in Africa, through its diplomatic missions and investment in key projects, has increased significantly in recent years. Back in 2018, Narendra Modi visited Uganda, where he delivered a historic speech to the Ugandan Parliament, outlining the ten foundations of India-Africa partnership. During that visit, India announced the opening of eighteen new embassies in Africa and strengthened its programme of credit lines and development assistance in sectors such as energy, infrastructure and digitalisation. In this vein, India has experienced rapid growth in the Global Diplomacy Index (Lowy Institute, 2024), especially in this region, where almost three quarters of its new diplomatic delegations have been established. This increase reflects India's efforts on the African continent and its quest to consolidate its role as a leader in the Global South, although its economic capacity is still far from that of China, which continues to dominate in terms of economic influence on the continent (Ahuja and Kapur, 2018: 92).

In this vein, under India's chairmanship of the G20 in 2023, Narendra Modi achieved a diplomatic milestone by pushing for the African Union to become a permanent member of the G20, strengthening African representation in global forums. This

move reinforced India's image as a key player in Global South diplomacy.

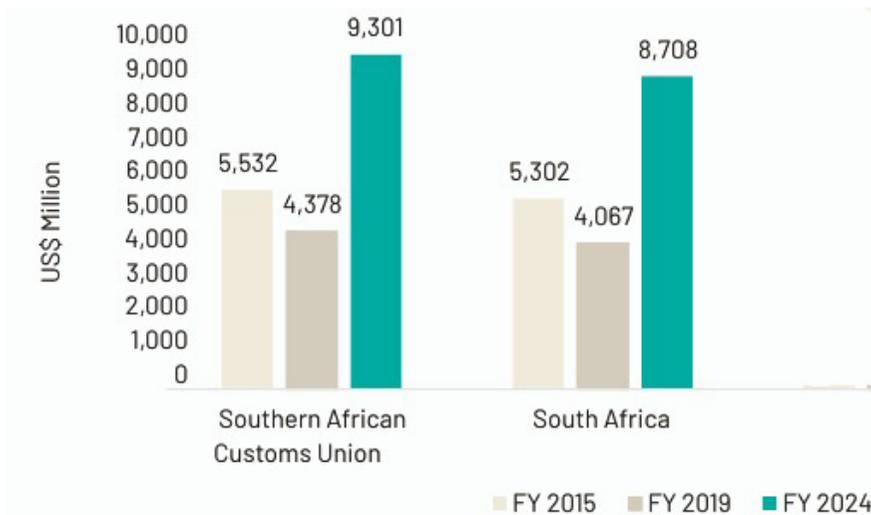
2.1.1 South Africa

Relations between India and South Africa are based on a deep-rooted historical connection, characterised by shared experiences of colonialism, the Indian diaspora on the African continent, and the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of non-violent resistance took shape during his time in South Africa. These historical links not only influenced anti-colonial movements in both regions but also laid the foundations for a bilateral relationship based on shared values such as social justice and sustainable development. Thus, the interaction between the two nations transcends the merely economic, encompassing other dimensions, such as the cultural and social, which are still significant in the contemporary context (Tiwari, 4).

The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between India and South Africa in 1994, following the end of *apartheid* and South Africa's transition to a multiracial democracy, marked a turning point in their relations. This process made it possible to consolidate cooperation based on common strategic, economic and cultural interests. Since then, the two countries have signed numerous Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on various issues and South Africa has emerged as a priority strategic partner for India in Africa. In this vein, the Indian government devised its Focus Africa plan in 2001-2002, which was centred on boosting cooperation with South Africa in areas such as trade, investment and joint participation in multilateral forums, including BRICS and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Additionally, the foreign ministers of India, South Africa and Brazil met in Brasilia on 6th June 2003 to launch the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum initiative.

South Africa has established itself as India's largest trading partner in Africa, with bilateral trade reaching approximately USD nineteen trillion dollars in 2024, with the goal of further growth in the coming decades. Indian exports (Figure 1) to South Africa include pharmaceuticals (South Africa ranks among the top five destinations for such products exported by India), vehicles, textiles and chemicals, whilst imports from South Africa focus on minerals essential to Indian industry, agricultural products and other strategic goods (Singh and

Yadav, 2021: 37). In addition, Indian companies such as the Tata Group, Mahindra and Infosys have established a strong presence in South Africa, contributing to local economic development. South African companies such as Naspers and Old Mutual have made significant investments in India, especially in the technology and financial services sectors. This mutual trade and investment dynamic underlines the economic interconnectedness between the two countries and its key role in strengthening bilateral relations (Sharma and Cyrill, 2024).



In the field of defence, South Africa is one of the continent’s leading arms producers and exporters, although the two countries’ defence relations are not especially noteworthy in terms of mere trade in arms or military equipment. Rather, they stand out for the exchange of technology in this field and for their shared interest in maritime security. India thus regards South Africa as a strategic player due to its geographical location, a meeting point between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and vital for maritime trade traffic. Along these lines, the two countries, together with Brazil, regularly conduct joint military maritime exercises known as IBSAMAR (Rajagopalan, 2022).

Indian-South African relations, whilst strong in historical and strategic terms, face significant challenges that limit their full development. Increasing competition with China, which has consolidated superior economic influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, reflects India’s difficulties in matching the Chinese model in key sectors such as infrastructure and

mining. Moreover, differences in geopolitical priorities constrain the relationship: whilst India focuses on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, South Africa prioritises African regional integration. Disagreements over defence policies and trade barriers, coupled with South Africa's domestic problems such as high unemployment and corruption, hinder further collaboration.

2.1.2 Nigeria

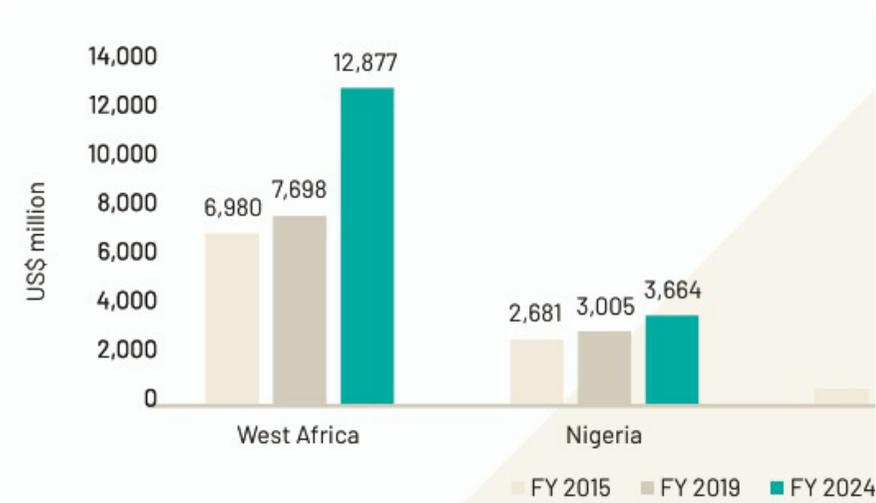
Relations between Nigeria and India have evolved significantly since the establishment of the Asian country's diplomatic mission in Nigeria in 1958. Today, economic, trade, political and security cooperation have consolidated as fundamental pillars of this bilateral relationship. These ties have grown significantly in recent decades, making India one of Nigeria's main trading partners, especially in the energy sector, on which India is so dependent. India has established itself as the largest importer of Nigerian oil, filling the vacuum left by declining US dependence on Nigerian crude, and Nigeria emerges as India's largest trading partner in Africa³.

Despite the existence of certain challenges, such as the imbalance in the trade balance —where Nigeria mainly exports raw materials whilst importing higher value-added manufactured goods from India— economic cooperation has grown exponentially. In 2022, the volume of bilateral trade (Figure 2) between the two was almost USD twelve million. India has also invested heavily in Nigeria, with an estimated value of over USD nineteen billion in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, energy, manufacturing and airline services⁴. In addition, it is possible to identify almost a couple of hundred Indian companies operating in the country, such as the Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), the Tata Group or Bharti Airtel in the telecommunications sector (Singh, Aslam, Preet and Mahapatra, 2020).

Politically and strategically, the two countries share common interests that have strengthened their ties. As members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), they have worked closely in international forums on global issues such as climate change, food

³ See: Chinedu Asadu. (2024). Indian and Nigerian leaders pledge stronger security ties and support for Global South. *AP News*. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/nigeriaindiainubumodib4ff7377642edf4bb7ceb0f750c8612e>

⁴ See: *High Commission of India*. (2023). Brief on IndiaNigeria Bilateral Economic & Commercial Relations.



security and sustainable development. This political partnership has promoted peace and stability in their respective regions and has allowed for an exchange of experiences on governance and development.

Security and defence cooperation is another crucial component of their relationship. Both countries face common threats such as terrorism, organised crime and piracy. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and terrorist threats in the region have prompted greater security collaboration, as the phenomenon of terrorism is one of the biggest threats to India, especially along its border with Pakistan and in its north-eastern region. India has also provided technical assistance and training to the Nigerian Security forces, thus strengthening Nigeria's capacity to meet these challenges. In addition, they have cooperated in the fight against terrorism and transnational crime, which has improved their internal security and contributed to regional stability.

Nigeria-India relations face several key challenges. There is an economic imbalance in which India benefits most, especially through oil imports, generating a trade deficit for Nigeria. Moreover, insecurity in the African country, marked by terrorism and violence, affects the perception of Indian investors. This is compounded by poor infrastructure in Nigeria, which increases costs for Indian companies, and a lack of technological capabilities, which limits their competitiveness. Finally, negative perceptions among the populations of both countries hinder deeper cooperation. Overcoming these challenges requires addressing

both structural imbalances and social tensions to strengthen their bilateral collaboration (Olaniran, 2019).

2.2 Latin America: new opportunities for Indian diplomacy

Relations between India and Latin America have historically been limited, mainly due to geographical distance and lack of significant strategic interests. Latin America has been a marginal player in India's foreign policy, as it was seen as a region that has not traditionally played a major role in global geopolitics. As a result, the region has been relegated in Indian foreign policy circles as a low priority. For a long time, the lack of interaction was due to the absence of a meaningful connection in terms of common interests (Seshasayee, 2023: 3).

On the economic front, the situation has changed considerably in recent years. India and Latin America have found areas of economic cooperation in sectors where India is strong, such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, vehicles and energy. The region has begun to be seen as an ideal opportunity among the more regulated and competitive markets like the US and Europe and the less competitive markets in Africa, and this has led to increased commercial interest from potential partners in this field. Although Latin America remains a competitive market for China, India has overtaken China in certain sectors, such as information technology, with more than 40,000 local jobs in the region thanks to Indian companies. Moreover, Latin America has seen India as part of a strategy to diversify its economic relations and reduce its dependence on the West (Badri-Maharaj, 2017).

However, there are still limitations to trade linkage. India has signed Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) with Chile and Mercosur, but these agreements are less ambitious than the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that India has signed with other regions such as South Korea, Japan or ASEAN. Although trade with Mercosur already exceeds trade with Japan, India has not yet shown interest in upgrading these agreements into more comprehensive treaties, which is very much a missed opportunity. The lack of comprehensive free trade agreements presents a challenge to deepening the economic relationship between the two.

In political and strategic terms, India has shown a growing interest in Latin America in recent years. Traditionally, India's Ministry

of External Affairs kept the region in the background, delegating its oversight to a minister of state, Ministry for External Affairs, but since 2022, this has changed. Key Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, have been brought under the direct supervision of the Indian foreign minister, allowing for greater political involvement. Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, has visited several countries in the region and has participated in international forums such as the G20, where relations with Latin America play an important role. Several Latin American leaders have also visited India, opening up new opportunities for long-term cooperation.

Moreover, India and Latin America share similar principles in terms of strategic non-alignment and autonomy. India promotes a policy on this, focused on independent international decision-making, whilst Latin America has adopted a modern version of active non-alignment, adapted to contemporary challenges. However, the lack of effective regional integration in Latin America remains an obstacle to strengthening strategic cooperation. India has not yet developed a comprehensive mechanism to address the region as a whole, nor has it engaged meaningfully with regional blocs such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Pacific Alliance, Mercosur or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) (Cimoli, 2018).

2.2.1 Brazil

Brazil is one of India's most important partners in Latin America, with strong ties in both economic and political spheres. On the commercial side, the relationship has shown remarkable growth. In 2024, bilateral trade exceeded USD eleven billion, with Brazil exporting mainly petroleum (crude oil) and edible vegetable oils, whilst India stood out for its exports of refined petroleum, pharmaceuticals (Brazil is among the top five destinations for these Indian products), automobiles and agrochemicals. Brazil is the largest importer (over 41%) and exporter (over 29%)⁵ of Indian products in Latin America. This trade reflects the continued strengthening of economic relations, which also include significant investments in sectors such as information technology, energy, mining and automotive.

⁵ See: *Annual Report 202324*, Ministry of Commerce Government of India.

Politically, Brazil has the closest ties with India in Latin America. Both nations share strategic objectives, such as reform of the UN Security Council, where they aspire to a permanent seat. Moreover, their collaboration in global initiatives, such as the IBSA Dialogue Forum and the G20+ bloc of emerging economies, has reinforced their shared geopolitical agendas.

Defence cooperation is another fundamental pillar of their relationship. During President Jair Bolsonaro's visit to India in 2020, the Brazil-India Defence Dialogue was established, and agreements were signed to expand military technology collaboration. Brazilian companies such as Taurus have entered partnerships with Indian companies, such as Jindal, for joint arms production. In addition, Brazil is exploring the export of military technology, including cargo and training aircraft, armoured vehicles and submarines (Gouvea, Kapelianis and Padovani, 2021).

Cooperation in the energy sector, particularly in ethanol production, also stands out as a strategic priority. Brazil supports India in developing its capacity to reach the target of 20% ethanol blending with petrol by 2030, thereby improving its energy sustainability. This effort, together with the strengthening of ties in areas such as bioenergy, cybersecurity and traditional medicine, positions both countries as strategic partners whose economic and political synergies shall continue to grow in the long term.

2.2.2 Mexico

Historically, there have been notable exchanges since the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the contribution of Indian agricultural scientist Pandurang Khankhoje to the development of agricultural practices in Mexico and the role of MN Roy, an Indian political activist, in the founding of the Communist Parties in both countries. Additionally, the literary figures of Octavio Paz and Rabindranath Tagore have played a key role in the mutual cultural perception between the two nations.

In terms of trade relations (Figure 3), Mexico overtook Brazil a few years ago as India's largest trading partner in Latin America with a volume of approximately USD 8.43 billion. However, it would be desirable to upgrade the Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) to more comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) in order to maximise trade opportunities. A key example of growing economic relations is the Mexican conglomerate Cinépolis, which has become the largest Latin American investor in India,

consolidating fifteen years of successful operations. This success is attributed to India's economic and social stability, as well as its economies of scale and population growth, underlining the country's attractiveness for Mexican and Latin American companies (Seshasayee, 2023: 16).



In terms of strategic interests, both Mexico and other Ibero-American nations perceive India as a viable alternative to dependence on China and the West. Moreover, they share similar development challenges, which opens the door to closer collaborations in key areas.

Finally, natural resource opportunities reinforce the economic dimension of the relationship. Mexico, as a strategic supplier of lithium and copper essential for the transition to green energy, has a crucial role to play in strengthening bilateral ties. This economic potential is complemented by sectors such as electronics and sustainable technologies, consolidating a relationship with prospects for sustained growth in the long term.

2.2.3 Argentina

Relations between India and Argentina have evolved significantly, covering areas such as trade, diplomacy, investment and technical cooperation, with the potential for a more balanced and strategic development in the future.

On the trade front, India and Argentina have diversified their economic exchanges. Whilst Argentina exports higher value-added products such as wines and fresh fruit, India presents opportunities to expand its consumer market through strategic goods and services. This dynamism reflects a shift towards a more sophisticated economic relationship (Olivera, 2020: 112). It is also worth

noting that Argentina is the fourth country in the Latin American region in terms of volume of imports (almost 7.5%) and exports (almost 12%) to and from India⁶.

From a diplomatic point of view, although India has established an embassy in Argentina that also covers Uruguay and Paraguay, it is possible to identify the need for a more robust diplomatic presence in Latin America. Reciprocity in the opening of embassies and increased high-level visits are key to strengthening bilateral ties.

In terms of investment and technical cooperation, sectors such as renewable energy and nuclear technology stand out, where India has the correct experience to collaborate and provide a boost to Argentina. The growing presence of Argentinian and other Latin American companies in India also underlines the importance of maximising access to the Indian market.

Finally, defence and security cooperation presents unexplored opportunities. India could offer military equipment, training and joint exercises; thus, strengthening mutual trust in strategic areas (Badri-Maharaj, 2017).

Despite progress, challenges such as lack of funding and direct trade routes can be pointed out. However, the political and economic interest of both nations in overcoming these barriers shows a strong commitment to developing a more strategic relationship, based on shared values and benefits.

2.3 Southeast Asia and ASEAN

India has developed a strategic connection with Southeast Asia due to demographic, historical and geographical factors. Its population of over 1.4 billion and its diaspora (Figure 5) in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Myanmar have facilitated cooperation. Moreover, its geographical position, with the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago close to the Straits of Malacca, gives it a key strategic advantage in global shipping lanes.

In terms of foreign policy, India has undergone a significant transformation since the Cold War, moving from a policy of non-alignment to a pragmatic alignment with various international actors. The *Look East Policy* of 1992 and its evolution into the *Act East Policy* of 2014 reflect its strategy of rapprochement

⁶ See: *Annual Report 202324*, Ministry of Commerce Government of India.

with Southeast Asia, with the aim of diversifying its alliances and reducing its dependence on the former USSR. Strengthening its regional leadership has been based on partnerships with ASEAN and other key countries.

On the trade front, trade with ASEAN has grown significantly since 1992. However, India's trade deficit with ASEAN has remained and the signing of the *ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA)* in 2009 has not achieved the expected effects, benefiting Southeast Asian countries more than India. India's withdrawal from the *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)* in 2019 signals a reassessment of its economic strategy in the region. Despite the growth in trade flows, India remains a minor player compared to China, the US and Japan in terms of investment and trade.

In the area of security and defence, cooperation with ASEAN and countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia has been increasing. India participates in security forums such as the *ASEAN Regional Forum* and the *ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus*. In addition, it has developed bilateral military exercises and strategic agreements, such as the sale of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines and the strengthening of naval cooperation with Vietnam and Singapore. However, it has not yet achieved a military presence comparable to that of other powers, such as the United States and China (Gil, 2025). Whilst India has made progress in its insertion in Southeast Asia, structural challenges remain. Lack of competitiveness in key sectors, low levels of investment and ASEAN countries' limited confidence in their regional leadership capacity have prevented a greater Indian role. To consolidate its influence, India needs to improve its economic integration, strengthen its presence in multilateral mechanisms and redefine its cooperation strategy with ASEAN, particularly in the context of growing rivalry with China in the region.

3 India's strategic relations with the Gulf countries

Since India's independence in 1947, the country has developed a strategic and multidimensional relationship with the Middle East region, guided by a shifting set of interests that include access to energy resources —especially oil— preserving open trade routes, maintaining political influence in the region, attracting foreign investment and, since the 1970s, protecting the welfare

of its growing diaspora in the region. Although these economic, energy and diaspora-related factors only became prominent from the 1970s onwards, it is possible to point out that India's fundamental strategic interests in the region have not changed materially since 1947. What has evolved over time are the strategies employed to protect and pursue these interests (Ansari, 2009).

In the early post-independence years, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India adopted a posture of active intervention in regional disputes, such as the Suez crisis in 1956, seeking to position itself as a mediator in the region and to counter the influence of powers such as Pakistan. However, as time went on, India began to align its interests with privileged partners such as Egypt and Iraq and finally, in the 1990s, adopted a strategy of *omni-balancing*, which attempted to balance relations with all key regional actors (Blarel, 2021).

During this time, India's Middle East policy was influenced not only by external geopolitical changes, but also by the ideologies and predispositions of Indian leaders in power, such as Nehru and Narasimha Rao, who were able to seize political opportunities to reformulate India's strategy in the region. Rao, for example, played a crucial role in the normalisation of relations with Israel in the 1990s, taking advantage of international and regional changes to orient Indian policy towards a more pragmatic approach (Burton 2019).

Since 2014, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India has intensified its engagement in the Middle East, driven by the need to ensure its energy security, strengthen its economic ties and address security challenges such as terrorism. Modi has reframed India's policy towards the region with a pragmatic and proactive approach, cementing strategic alliances with key players such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This change is reflected in increased bilateral trade, foreign investment in infrastructure projects in India, and cooperation in defence, maritime security and counterterrorism⁷.

In addition, Modi has highlighted the importance of the Indian diaspora, which makes a significant contribution and strength-

⁷ See: Pulipaka, S., and M. Musaddi. (2020). Power shifts and recalibrations: India and the Gulf. [online]. *The Economic Times*. [Accessed: 8 June 2024]. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/etcommentary/powershiftsandrecalibrationsindiaandthethegulf/>

ens ties with Gulf countries that are home to around nine million Indians (Pattnaik, Ghoble and Panda, 2024). He has used a personal approach to diplomacy, visiting numerous countries in the region and promoting strategic partnerships, such as two-way security and investment agreements. This approach reflects a historical continuity in India's strategic interests in the Middle East, adapted to contemporary challenges and framed by a more ambitious and visionary foreign policy.

3.1 United Arab Emirates

Relations between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have reached an unprecedented level of strategic and economic cooperation, especially during the Narendra Modi government. Since his first visit in 2015, Modi has stressed the importance of the UAE as a key partner, making additional visits in 2018 and 2019 to cement relations between the two. This effort has led to bilateral trade of USD 83.63 billion annually, making the UAE India's third largest trading partner. The UAE is the world's second largest destination for Indian exports and the third largest source of India's imports. In addition, the UAE has invested close to USD 18 trillion in India, whilst Indian companies have contributed more than USD 85 billion in strategic sectors such as infrastructure, manufacturing and technology. The signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022 has been a key pillar in this relationship, with the aim of significantly increasing trade in goods and services in the coming years (Puri, Teckchandani and Rahman, 2022).

The strengthening of these bilateral relations is also reflected in recognitions such as the presentation of the Order of Zayed to Modi in 2019, a gesture that symbolises his government's key role in this partnership. In addition, the strategic dialogue has evolved into areas of security, intelligence and counterterrorism, consolidating the UAE as an essential partner for India in national and maritime security. In technology and space, the two countries have fostered innovative collaborations including investments in artificial intelligence and space missions such as the *Hope Probe* to Mars. This bond, based on consistency and mutual commitment, is projected towards a new era of comprehensive cooperation, positioning both countries as key players in trade, technology and global geopolitics (Blarel, 2021).

3.2 Saudi Arabia

Relations between India and Saudi Arabia have evolved significantly since the Cold War, with an increasing emphasis on common economic and strategic interests. Following the Soviet Union's withdrawal, India reconsidered its foreign policy, opening up to the global market and seeking to stabilise its economy through privatisation and liberalisation. One of the main links to the Gulf region has been India's dependence on oil, and in this, Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in securing oil supplies. In addition, the large Indian expatriate community in the Gulf and India's religious link to holy sites in the region have also boosted bilateral relations (Sarwar, 2020).

Since Jaswant Singh's visit in 2001, economic relations between the two countries have grown substantially, with trade and oil imports being key elements. Despite previous tensions related to Pakistan and Iran, trade ties strengthened, with both countries adopting look west and look east policies, respectively, to tap emerging markets. The relationship was further consolidated with the signing of the Delhi Declaration in 2006, which marked the beginning of a new era of bilateral cooperation, establishing a framework for collaboration in areas such as trade, information technology and energy. In 2010, the reciprocity of high-level visits, including that of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Saudi Arabia, further cemented this relationship, making it one of the most important in Asia in terms of political, economic and security cooperation.

Under Narendra Modi's leadership, India-Saudi Arabia relations underwent a paradigm shift from being largely transactional to a genuine strategic partnership (Blarel, 2021). Whilst the foundations for this cooperation had already been laid with the Riyadh Declaration in 2010, Modi consolidated and deepened these ties. Saudi Arabia became one of India's largest trading partners, with a trade volume of USD 43.36 billion in 2024, the seventh largest recipient of Indian exports globally and the fifth largest source of Indian imports. During Modi's multiple visits to Riyadh, defence, intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation agreements were strengthened, reflecting closer alignment on security issues. A key aspect of this collaboration has been cooperation in the extradition of terrorists and the fight against money laundering, which has led Saudi Arabia to take specific steps, such as the deportation of individuals wanted by India.

This approach also coincided with a regional context in which relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were weakened, providing India with an opportunity to position itself as a reliable and strategic partner. In addition, cooperation extended to areas such as maritime security and multilateral dialogue in forums such as IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), reflecting a convergence of strategic interests. Thus, under Modi's leadership, the Indo-Saudi relationship was not only consolidated as a key axis of economic cooperation, but also as a strong partnership in terms of regional and global security (Kum, 2017).

3.3 Qatar

Relations between India and Qatar have a deep history dating back more than five thousand years, when trade contacts between the Indus Valley civilisation and the Mesopotamian Empire marked the exchange of pearls or horses, among other goods. Following Qatar's independence in 1971, India was one of the first countries to recognise the new State and relations have since intensified, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, with Qatar emerging as one of India's closest allies in the Gulf region (Kute, 2022).

Today, these relations have been consolidated in key areas such as energy, defence and economics. Qatar is a key player in the supply of liquefied natural gas and plays a key role in India's energy security, which strengthens their bilateral relationship. In addition, defence cooperation has been of great importance, with agreements ranging from joint training and exercises to efforts to collaborate in areas such as intelligence and counterterrorism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Qatar in 2016 marked an important milestone in this process, consolidating various cooperation agreements and promoting Qatari investment in infrastructure projects in India (Blarel, 2021).

The Indian diaspora in Qatar also reinforces these ties, contributing to both the Indian economy and Qatar's economic development. This human connection between the two countries gives India a strategic position and significant leverage in its interactions with Qatar.

In addition, sectors such as education and tourism continue to be areas of growing interest, with many Indian students choosing

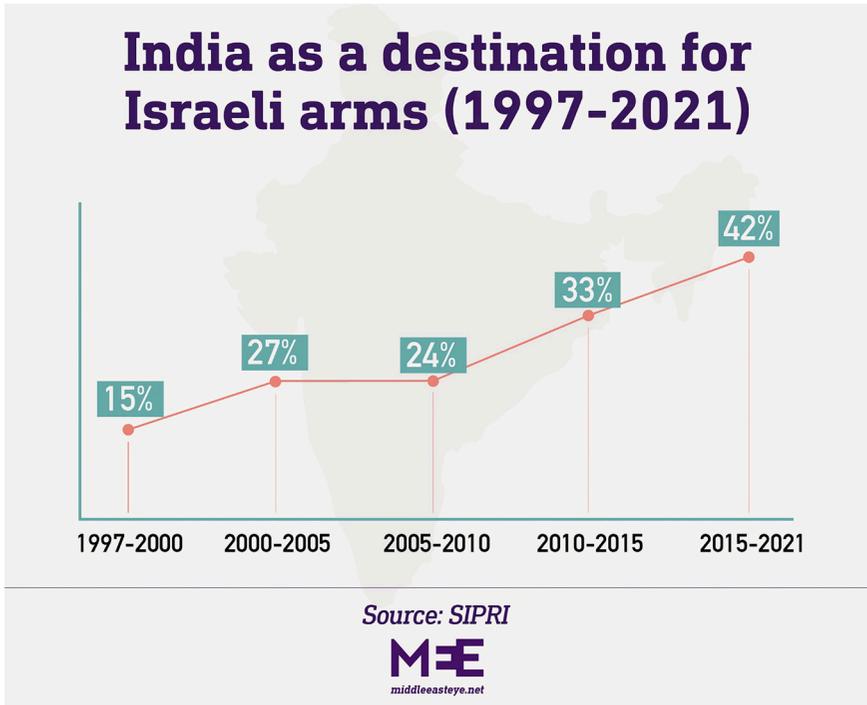
Qatar for their higher education. There is also a growing interest among Qataris to visit destinations in India. This strong relationship, based on cooperation in a number of areas, continues to evolve and to project strategic influence in the Gulf region and beyond.

4 Relations with Israel: a strategic and technological alliance

India-Israel relations have evolved significantly since India's diplomatic recognition of Israel in 1950, in a context marked by Cold War-influenced foreign policies and Indian solidarity with the Palestinian cause. For several decades, relations were limited due to India's dependence on Arab countries for its oil supplies and its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which made rapprochement with Israel difficult. This approach changed after 1992, when India established full diplomatic relations with Israel, allowing for a diversification of cooperation in sectors such as defence, trade, agricultural cooperation and science and technology (Gogoi, 2022).

Since then, bilateral cooperation has expanded considerably, and India has become one of the largest buyers of Israeli military equipment (Figure 4). The two countries have intensified their cooperation in the defence and security sector, in particular in the development of technologies and the fight against terrorism. In this context, the launch of the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F), a joint cooperation fund between India and Israel to promote research and development (R&D) in technology and industrial innovation, is noteworthy. This includes the sharing and joint development of advanced technologies such as missiles —see the Barak-8 surface-to-surface missile— warning systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which has strengthened India's defence capabilities.

In terms of economic cooperation, India and Israel have managed to achieve significant growth in bilateral trade, reaching USD 6.52 trillion by 2024. In addition, both countries have explored areas such as agriculture, with joint initiatives in irrigation technologies, and cooperation in energy, particularly renewable energy. In 2018, they signed a memorandum of understanding to explore opportunities in the energy sector, including issues such as oil, gas and renewable energy, in addition to collaboration with the UAE on trilateral projects.



A turning point in relations was Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in 2017, which marked a shift in India's traditional stance towards Palestine and made evident a more pragmatic approach towards Israel. During this visit, Modi not only strengthened defence and trade ties, but also reoriented India's foreign policy away from direct engagement with the Palestinian cause (Blarel, 2021: 98). This pragmatic approach was evident in his decision not to visit Ramallah, as was customary for visits by Indian leaders, and in his parallel strategy of maintaining close relations with Iran. This diplomatic balance reflects India's flexibility as it seeks to strengthen its security and diversify its alliances in a globalised, multipolar world.

Despite this rapprochement with Israel, India has maintained its support for Palestinian rights in the international arena, underlining its multifaceted diplomatic approach. The flexibility of India's foreign policy, which has not completely renounced its historical support for Palestine, contrasts with its growing cooperation with Israel. This pragmatism has been key in the evolution of bilateral relations, allowing India to diversify its strategic partnerships without compromising its posture on other international fronts (Ningtujam, 2021).

5 India's strategic interests in the Arctic

The Arctic space is characterised by a vast expanse of water, largely covered by a layer of ice known as sea ice. In addition to its climatic importance, this region is home to significant natural resource reserves which, according to the US Geological Survey, account for about 30% of the world's natural gas and 13% of the world's oil. In addition, the Arctic has two strategic sea lanes whose access has increased due to the progressive melting of ice. These routes not only reduce the distances between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans but also emerge as viable alternatives to the Panama and Suez Canals. They include the North-East or Northern Sea Route (NMR), which runs along the Russian coast, and the North-West Route, which runs along the Canadian coast (Arrieta-Ruiz, 2020:231). This is why this geographical area has attracted the interest of numerous countries such as China and India, beyond the Arctic 5 and other Arctic States⁸ in recent years.

In March 2010, Dr Vijay Sakhuja, Director of Research at the Indian Council of World Affairs, noted that —under the Svalbard Treaty— India is a 'stakeholder' in the Arctic. He proposed a strategy focused on scientific cooperation, expeditions and the development of technical capabilities, whilst disregarding the historical militarisation of the region. In the years that followed, India strengthened its presence in the Arctic, achieving observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 after establishing a research base in Ny-Ålesund. Since then, India's Arctic policy, overseen by the Ministry of External Affairs, has sought to integrate scientific, geopolitical and economic aspects, including the importance of the Arctic in climate change and its global impact, especially on issues such as water security and monsoon patterns.

India's official Arctic policy, published in March 2022, sets out key pillars such as science, environmental protection, economic and human development, governance and international cooperation. Inspired by the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family), it emphasises sustainability in the use of natural resources and opportunities for collaboration in the Arctic, especially with Arctic Council countries. However, it avoids controversies such as the near-Arctic State concept promoted by

⁸ Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark and Norway and three other States, also belonging to the Arctic space: Iceland, Finland and Sweden.

China, adopting a neutral and diplomatic approach (Zaikov and Bhagwat, 2022).

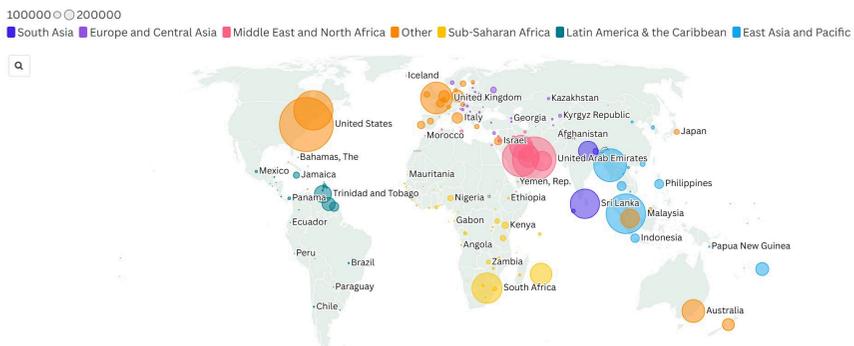
Despite its progress, India faces challenges in consolidating its Arctic presence. Its focus has been largely on scientific research, especially in collaboration with Norway and the EU. To increase its influence, it should strengthen scientific and academic exchange programmes, following the example of other Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea, which have established strategic alliances with Arctic states. This will be crucial in translating its policy into specific, sustainable actions.

6 Cultural diplomacy and India's soft power

India's soft power is a key element of its public diplomacy and is aimed at influencing other nations through cultural, ethical and diplomatic means rather than military force. This approach demonstrates itself in several salient aspects.

First, India promotes its rich cultural heritage, such as yoga, Bollywood, its cuisine and classical arts, to establish links with the global community and enhance its international image. This effort has historical roots going back to Prime Minister Nehru, who stressed the importance of non-alignment and decolonisation. Since independence, successive governments have used soft power to establish development partnerships and strengthen the country's international position.

Currently, the Modi government has leveraged the use of Buddhism, yoga and the Indian diaspora (Figure 5) (Lentin, 2022) as strategic soft power tools. This approach seeks to highlight India's unique attributes and foster peaceful and cooperative international relations. However, the diversity of the Indian



population presents a challenge to projecting a unified national image. Despite this, the government plays a key role in integrating soft power resources to advance national interests.

In a global context where Western dominance is showing signs of relative decline, India's soft power is becoming increasingly important in its rise as a global leader. This positioning is supported by the country's economic resilience vis-à-vis other international actors. Overall, India's soft power strategy emphasises cultural diplomacy and mutual cooperation, presenting the country as a promoter of peace and integration in the international community (Yaseen, 2022).

7 Conclusions

This chapter reflects how India has evolved as a strategic actor on the international stage, articulating a foreign policy adapted to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. In a context marked by the transition to a multipolar world and the apparent decline of Western dominance, India's economic resilience and strategic diversification have been instrumental in consolidating its global influence.

India has significantly broadened its horizons of external action, transcending the Indo-Pacific to adopt a global approach that includes regions such as Africa, Ibero-America, the Middle East and even emerging regions such as the Arctic. This strategic move seeks to position India as a responsible leader on multi-lateral issues, strengthening its diplomatic and trade relations whilst exploring new areas of international cooperation.

Geopolitical competition in Africa has also become significant for India, particularly vis-à-vis powers such as China. The continent has become a central focus of India's strategy, with significant investments and efforts to deepen economic, political and cultural cooperation. Such initiatives reinforce India's commitment to mutually beneficial growth, underlining its ability to act simultaneously on several strategic fronts.

India has also intensified its engagement with Ibero-America, establishing strategic relationships with key countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. Through this collaboration, it seeks to promote inclusive and cooperative growth, focusing on sectors such as energy, technology and security. Despite the challenges arising from the lack of regional integration and the need for

more ambitious trade agreements, India is positioning itself as an important partner in the region, promoting an agenda of strategic autonomy that reflects its principles of non-alignment and a proactive approach towards the Global South.

In the Gulf, India has cultivated multifaceted relationships, securing a steady flow of energy resources and strengthening ties with key countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where it is also possible to identify a sizeable Indian diaspora. Defence and counterterrorism cooperation has been fundamental to ensuring regional security.

The relationship with Israel also denotes a remarkable pragmatism in India's foreign policy which, whilst maintaining its support for the Palestinian cause, has sought to expand cooperation in defence and technology. This approach aims to diversify strategic alliances without compromising their historical positions.

Finally, India's interest in the Arctic has grown in recent years, reflecting its commitment to science and sustainable development. By gaining observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and establishing a research base, India seeks to integrate itself into discussions on climate change and its global effects, as well as explore economic opportunities in a strategic region rich in natural resources.

In terms of security, India faces significant challenges from terrorism on its borders with Pakistan and in its north-eastern region. This reality has prompted an intensification of its defence cooperation with strategic allies, highlighting the need to build strong networks to address emerging threats. However, challenges related to the lack of historical interaction with certain nations remain, which calls for a more proactive approach to maximise the impact of its partnerships.

Cultural diplomacy and soft power play a crucial role in enabling India to project a unified national identity —despite its internal challenges— and to consolidate its image as a promoter of peace, stability and development. The use of soft power includes tools such as the Indian diaspora, the promotion of India's cultural and educational heritage and its ability to build bridges with other nations. These initiatives underline the importance of cultural diplomacy not only as a means to strengthen their internal identity, but also as a resource for building international relations and increasing their influence.

Finally, India's strong commitment to multilateralism and international cooperation in a dynamic global environment is worth highlighting. Its ability to balance national interests with various strategic partnerships at the international level will be decisive in its consolidation as a global power. As it faces the challenges of a changing world, India will need to maintain a pragmatic and flexible strategy that allows it to adapt to emerging realities and seize strategic opportunities. Its multidimensional strategy, based on soft power, the establishment of diverse relationships with other states beyond the Indo-Pacific and security collaboration, reinforces its role in the global balance of power and positions it as a model for integration and collaboration in the 21st century.

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