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The US in the Indo-Pacific: Leveraging India's Period of Strategic Opportunity

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CHIETIGJ BAJPAEE, MAY 22 2022

'So much of the future of the world is going to be written here in the Indo-Pacific over the next several decades'. These words were uttered by US President Joe Biden in South Korea as part of his first visit to the region as president. This alludes to the fact that despite the current focus on developments in Ukraine, Asia remains a priority region of US foreign policy. Embedded in this is recognition that while challenging Russian aggression is the immediate priority, the long-term strategic focus is on challenging China's assertive and expansionist ambitions, including deterring the emergence of a Sino-centric regional and global order.

Although Biden is not travelling to India during his Asia trip, his visit and recent developments indicate that the country is very much at the center of debates on the emerging regional and global order. In this context, India faces a period of strategic opportunity that it can leverage to strengthen its position on the world stage. After delineating the 'period of strategic opportunity' concept, this paper will discuss this in the context of India's global role before noting the challenges facing New Delhi as it seeks to exploit this narrow window of opportunity.

The 'period of strategic opportunity' concept

The 'period of strategic/ historic opportunity' refers to a Chinese concept ('*zhanlue jiyuqi*') that emerged in the post-Cold War period as Beijing sought to leverage the favourable economic and geopolitical environment to strengthen its position on the world stage. On the economic front, this came at a time when China was undergoing a period of rapid double-digit growth and integration into the global economy facilitated by its investment and export-driven development model. On the geopolitical front, the United States, while oscillating between perceptions of China as a 'strategic partner' and 'strategic competitor', generally saw China as a country that it could do business with as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. China sought to leverage this period of strategic opportunity by projecting an image of itself as a beacon of stability and reassuring neighbouring countries and regional and global powers of its benign intentions. Through its 'New Security Concept' and 'Peaceful Rise/ Development' narratives Beijing sought maintain a stable periphery and global environment so it could focus on domestic development. Undergirding this was Deng Xiao-ping's dictum of 'biding time' and 'maintaining a low profile' (as part of his 24-character strategy), which allowed China to maintain a focus on reform and opening up.

A second phase of this period of strategic opportunity for China emerged amid signs of weakness in the West, triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis and US preoccupation with its so-called 'War on Terror', which was further fuelled by the rise of populist and polarised politics (exemplified by the Brexit vote in the UK and Trump administration in the US). This prompted Beijing to pivot towards a more assertive posture on the world stage, which manifested in China's efforts to build a new regional and global architecture, ranging from the 'Belt and Road Initiative' to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It also led to more belligerent Chinese behaviour, which has been most visible in the South and East China Seas, Taiwan Strait and along the Sino-Indian border, as well as a proclivity to punish countries that challenge its sovereignty and status through its 'wolf warrior diplomacy'.

India's 'period of strategic opportunity'

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While the period of strategic opportunity concept has become increasingly out-dated in Chinese discourse (and replaced by other concepts, such as President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' entailing the 'Great revival of the Chinese nation'), it is of growing relevance to India. On the face of it India's 'shaky' position (according to President Biden) on the Russian invasion of Ukraine – rooted in its long-standing and close relationship with Moscow – would appear to weaken the country's relations with the West. Moreover, a more polarised and potentially bifurcated international system would appear antithetical to India's worldview, which has been embedded in the concept of non-alignment (and its more recent manifestation of strategic autonomy).

However, a recent flurry of diplomatic activity appears to indicate otherwise: within a span of a few weeks New Delhi hosted a string of leaders and senior officials from several countries (including Japan, China, Russia, the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany), with all seeking India's alignment with their position on the Ukraine conflict. The West has also offered to help India reduce its dependence on Russian arms imports in order to weaken its bond with Moscow. If anything, recent geopolitical developments appear conducive to India's strategic interests. For instance, the first US-ASEAN Special Summit in May was in line with India's longstanding commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' in the regional architecture.

President Biden's Asia visit further complements India's regional interests. The culmination of Biden's trip is the summit meeting of the Quad, which has acquired newfound importance as it has expanded beyond its initial single-issue focus on maritime security to develop a more broad-based agenda covering such issues as the pandemic, supply-chain resilience and climate change. This comes at a time when New Delhi has gained renewed interest in the Quad amid the deteriorating Sino-Indian relationship following their border skirmishes in 2020.

Undergirding these developments is a renewed emphasis on value-driven diplomacy. This has made India a more attractive partner as the world's largest democracy, a proponent of the liberal international order, but also an advocate for the 'Global South' and a more balanced regional and global architecture. This places India in the unique position of bridging the divide between the West and the rest. With India occupying a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2021 and 2022 and hosting the G20 Leaders' Summit for the first time in 2023, India has also been given a seat at key forums to shape the agenda on issues of global governance.

Taking the example of the India-Europe relationship, the contrast between the bad blood during the EU-China virtual summit in April and bonhomie during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's European tour in May could not be more stark. Despite the fact that New Delhi has not been as vocal as western countries in condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, there is recognition that India stands apart from China in its position on the conflict. From a European perspective, this reflects the fact that until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Europe and India maintained similar worldviews, with both maintaining an economic dependence on Russia and seeking a position of 'strategic autonomy' in their foreign policies, which entailed maintaining an equidistant position from the US and China. While the EU has softened this stance following the Ukraine conflict, there is nonetheless a degree of understanding for India's position in Europe (particularly as several European countries retain a proclivity for an autonomous or independent foreign policy).

This period of strategic opportunity has also manifested in the area of economic and commercial interactions. China's slowing growth fuelled by its zero tolerance approach toward the pandemic and regulatory crackdowns, coupled with the bad blood in the US-China relationship has reinvigorated the push to decouple and/or diversify supply-chains, particularly in critical and emerging technologies. India is a potential beneficiary of this, as indicated by the establishment of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council during the visit of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to India – making it only the second country (after the United States) with which the EU has established such a forum. India is also a member of the Supply-Chain Resilience Initiative that seeks to diversify supply-chains away from an over-dependence on China. These developments, along with projections that India will be the world's fastest growing major economy in 2022, make it an increasingly attractive investment destination.

Complementing this more opportune external environment is a more confident and bolder Indian foreign policy. This was exemplified during the US-India 2+2 meeting with the United States in April when Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar offered a blunt rebuttal to a question on India's dependence on Russian energy imports (noting that

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Europe's purchases in an afternoon exceeded that of India in a month). This more assertive foreign policy can be traced to the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that assumed power in 2014. While some of the Modi government's actions have arguably entailed more rhetoric than substance – for example renaming the erstwhile 'Look East' Policy to the 'Act East' Policy – it also reflects the Modi government's stronger mandate and realpolitik worldviews, which are rooted in the *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalist) ideology of the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party).

This has translated into a more assertive foreign policy. This can be evidenced by the renewed momentum in concluding free trade agreements (FTA) with several countries, including the United Arab Emirates in February, Australia in April and on-going trade negotiations with the United Kingdom, European Union and Canada among others. This is a far cry from New Delhi's protectionist tendencies as illustrated by India's exit the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Agreement) regional trade agreement in 2019 and stalled trade negotiations with the United States and EU.

A narrow window of opportunity

However, this period of strategic opportunity is also a narrow window of opportunity for India. How long will the West tolerate India's engagement with Russia at a time when EU and US continue to decouple from Moscow? For example, as Europe pushes towards reducing its dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, India's oil imports from Russia have continued to increase and are more than double its oil imports in 2021. This could lead to an emerging narrative that India is indirectly financing Russian aggression through its energy purchases.

On the issue of decoupling or reorienting supply-chains this is also easier said than done, as supply-chains remain "sticky". This means that for the foreseeable future China will remain central to global supply-chains and transnational production networks. Moreover, as China eventually reopens borders and relaxes its zero-tolerance approach towards the pandemic (most likely after the 20th Party Congress towards the end of the year), the operational challenges facing companies in China will dissipate.

Similarly, the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific cannot be taken for granted. The highly polarised nature of US domestic politics alludes to a possible return for Donald Trump (or at least some form of Trumpism) following the presidential election in 2024 with a reversion to the isolationist, unilateralist and transactional politics that accompanied the previous administration. In this context, India cannot take for granted the United States' role as a guarantor of regional and global security. This has been reaffirmed by the paltry US commitment of \$150 million to Southeast Asia during the recent US-ASEAN Summit and the United States' recently unveiled Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which lacks detail and has reportedly been watered down (while following in the footsteps of other US initiatives that have made limited progress, including the Biden administration's 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) partnership; the Trump administration's BUILD Act and the Obama administration's strategic 'pivot' or 're-balance' toward Asia). These developments indicate that New Delhi cannot rely on the United States as an advocate of India's expanded regional and global role. Rather, India will need to leverage the possibility of a reduced (or more fickle) US role on the world stage to strengthen its external engagement. This is what other so-called 'middle powers', such as Japan have been doing.

Exploiting this period of strategic opportunity will also be contingent on strengthening India's internal and regional situation. India's domestic reforms have historically been the weakest link of its external engagement. This remains the case as the country suffers from power shortages fuelled by a record heat wave on the subcontinent. While India has escaped the infamous 'Hindu rate of growth', it remains vulnerable to an 'Indian rate of policymaking' fuelled by challenges of bureaucratic inertia and inter-ministerial coordination. While technology advancements have streamlined decision-making in some areas (e.g. Aadhaar card strengthening India's social welfare system), there remains slow progress in other areas, such as infrastructure projects aimed at strengthening regional connectivity. On the political front, while the BJP is moving from strength to strength electorally, it remains to be seen whether the Modi government's progressive reform-driven agenda gains the upper hand over its more divisive identity-driven politics.

On the regional front, India is surrounded by several unstable or near-failed states. Afghanistan following the US/

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NATO withdrawal is a prime example, with the Taliban takeover of the country largely negating New Delhi's diplomatic and development initiatives in the country over the last two decades. Myanmar's experiment with democracy has also failed with the country on the verge of renewed civil war while New Delhi's role (or at least visible role) has been largely limited to protecting its own economic and security interests rather than democracy promotion. Sri Lanka is in the midst of an economic crisis, although India has been a key source of economic support to the country. And of course there is India's perennial 'all-weather' adversary, Pakistan. Coupled with concerns over environmental and inflationary pressures and food security across South Asia, how can India aspire to 'Great Power' status in the midst of an unstable periphery?

Finally, there is the question of India's image as a responsible global power. While its status as a leading contributor to UN peacekeeping operations is well known, recent developments have raised questions about India's ability to be a provider and protector of global public goods. Just as India's vaccine export ban triggered by the second wave of the pandemic that hit the country in early 2021 undermined India's status as the "pharmacy of the world", so the recent wheat export ban undermines the government's pledge to "feed the world" following the disruption of commodity exports triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is supplemented by India's peripheral role in mediating key global flashpoints, from the Korean Peninsula to Iran's nuclear program and most recently the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Conclusions

During his speech in South Korea, Biden noted that 'we are standing at an inflection point in history'. This geopolitical turning point is a reflection of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a more pronounced strategic rivalry between the United States and China. With respect to the later, both countries are seeking to fill gaps in their regional engagement; the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework seeks to bridge a gap between the country's economic and security engagement, which has been fuelled by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the erstwhile Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017 while the US has continued to pursue a string of security-related initiatives, such as AUKUS security partnership. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's proposed 'Global Security Partnership' offers a security counterpart to the 'Belt and Road Initiative'. At the same time, neither the US nor China appear willing to accept an expanded role for the other in the emerging regional and global order. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng alluded to this when he warned that the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy 'is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe' and 'if allowed to go on unchecked,.. it would bring unimaginable consequences, and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss'.

The trick for India will be to navigate this more polarised and potentially bifurcated international system while maintaining its importance through its proactive diplomacy abroad and robust growth and reform agenda at home. While India faces a period of strategic opportunity, its growing strategic significance is not a forgone conclusion. India cannot be a passive observer or complacent in the face of a rapidly evolving regional and global order. When the dust settles a new world order will emerge and India's place in it is yet to be defined.

About the author:

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