

Exploring The Depth of Indian Multilateralism

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Exploring the Depth of Indian Multilateralism

Pooja Jain

Historically, India has identified itself as a post-colonial, developing country with a "virtuous" foreign policy orientation, in solidarity with other countries of the global south. It has asserted its independence from the superpowers of the time, the United States and the former USSR, with the creation, among other initiatives, of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).¹ Today, India, an emerging country seeking economic and strategic autonomy, is embracing "multi-alignment" through various partnerships, such as the QUAD, which primarily serve its national interests. With developing countries, it deploys an 'enlightened interest' policy underlining its potential and ambition for leadership. However, India's insistence on an independent foreign policy with singular leadership ambitions of its own is averse to any "binding alliance" strategically or ideologically. India's multilateralism and the credibility of its leadership ability amongst other developing countries is the subject of inquiry for this paper.

India seeks to carve out a space and path of its own in a multipolar world; in such an arrangement, India's stance and its perception amongst other developing countries is of paramount importance. How strongly does India represent the interests of other developing countries in international fora? Does India have the diplomatic and ideological capital to rally other developing countries around specific issues and interests? Could a strategic and ideological rapprochement with India allow countries like France to mend fraught relationships and make a fresh start in their engagements with other developing countries in the Indo-Pacific and the Indian-Ocean region? This paper gives a bird's eye view of Indian foreign policy through a study of its apparent contradictions. It focuses on how India engages itself multilaterally and navigates its relationships with countries in Asia and Africa while deepening ties with its partners in the west.

The paper argues that while India is lacking in hard power, it has been deft in pooling intangible resources to assert a narrative of its own rise. From impressing on being the singular voice of the global south and having the ear of the west, it has been carving out for itself the role of the world's balancing power. Furthermore, multilateralism helps India shore up support for an assertive and independent

¹ India's Foreign Policy: Successes, Failures and Vision in the Changing World Order Talk by External Affairs Minister Shri Yashwant Sinha, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, November 18, 2002, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/9285/Indias_Foreign_Policy_Successes_Failures_and_Vision_in_the_Changing_World_Order_Talk_by

foreign policy at little cost to its wider partnerships. However, at present the country has little or no influence to affect the course or outcome of international events.

Indian Multilateralism: from Narrative Discourse to Complex Ground Realities

India has given a new turn to its foreign policy focusing on branding and image-enhancing and tailoring it to the purpose of domestic elections. The spectacle and communication around foreign visits and multilateral events cater to the domestic media and public – the pomp and show around the G20 in 2023, held across different cities in India, is a case in point.

Multilateral platforms are an important avenue for India to project its power and ambitions of being a world leader/teacher or '*Vishwaguru*'; these organisations are also seen to embody '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*', or the concept of the world as one big family, another pillar of the Indian foreign policy discourse. India's focus on non-conflictual and multi-faceted multilateralism is encapsulated in its desire to be '*Vishwamitra*' or partner to the world. India as president of the G20 widely communicated its professed status as the 'Mother of Democracy'², democracy being a major plank of India's soft power. India's democratic status forms the basis of its leadership ambition, lending it the ability and credibility to straddle the western and non-western worlds with equal ease.

The country is increasingly courted by western powers, namely by the United States and its allies.³ As the world's most populated country, it is a big consumer market for social media entrepreneurs, many of whom are based in the United States. With an 11 per cent market share, India is also the largest importer of arms, a position it has held since 1993 according to the 2023 SIPRI factsheet.⁴ Russia has been India's largest supplier of arms, but with its share down from 64 per cent to 45 per cent, India's market is more and more open to supplies from other major arms' exporters. From 2018 to 2022, at 30 per cent, India was the leading buyer of arms from France (SIPRI 2023). With the Indo-Pacific becoming a strategic flashpoint, there is heightened interest in India's defence capabilities. However, unlike China, India is not an arms exporter, which makes it pertinent to explore the draw of Indian multilateralism, notably with Africa and Asia, and its ambition to lead the global south.

² Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Bharat: Mother of Democracy, Last updated on: Tuesday, March 12, 2024

³ Chong Wenzhong, Byron, Centre on Asia and Globalisation, National University of Singapore The G20 Summit: India takes on China for Leadership of the Global South, China-India Brief #232, September 29, 2023, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/publications/center-publications/publication-article/detail/the-g20-summit-india-takes-on-china-for-leadership-of-the-global-south>

⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon, Siemon T. Wezeman, Trends in international Arms Transfers, SIPRI Factsheet, March 2023

India commenced its G20 leadership by announcing the platform ‘Voice of the Global South’ and closed it with a call for the African Union to become a formal member of the G20, which beget the following questions: How prepared and willing were other developing countries from Africa to let India assume the agency of their leadership given that South Africa is a part of the G20? Did African countries actively time their inclusion in the G20 to India’s presidency of it? Or was this an opportune and astute narrative created by India?

The benefits to India of the African Union joining the G20 during its presidency are plentiful: India adds goodwill and moral weight to its leadership ambitions with the potential to increase support for its positions at global platforms like the United Nations Organisation, it strengthens the collective claims of developing countries for the reform of international institutions, and, simultaneously, it raises India’s prominence amongst western countries struggling with leadership legitimacy. Reforming multilateral institutions, demands for a more equitable world order, and climate finance were some of the top priorities of the Voice of the Global South Summit as expressed by the public communications of the countries in attendance.⁵ Economic development and differentiated responsibilities on climate aside, there is a widening gap between the west and many developing countries stemming from demographics. India, the most populated country in the world, shall continue to see a rise in its population, and Africa is projected to see half of the world’s growth in population between now and 2050.⁶ Demographics, representation, and development are the most pressing interests shared by India and Africa. And, while the leadership claim of India can be debated on various levels, it seized the moment and captured a vocabulary and space overlooked by developed countries - initiative and consultation with non-members. India was able to project leadership of the global south despite its reputation of having a guarded and independent foreign policy.

Indeed, India has been emphatic about autonomy and non-dominance in the practice of its trade relations with an aversion to large-scale trade agreements that could impinge on its national interests. Often, this position has left India taking decisions at odds with the interests of other developing countries. India has been intransigent when it comes to trade: it refused to be a part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)⁷; its free trade agreements with the EU or the UK have been in the

⁵ Ministry of foreign Affairs and External Trade, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2nd Voice of Global South Summit (17 November 2023), November 17, 2023

President Ruto, Global South must push for more Inclusive World Order, President of the Republic of Kenya, November 17, 2023

Deputy foreign Minister Participates in the 2nd voice of the Global South Summit, by MFA-MASTER, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, Republic of Ghana, November 20, 2023

Minh Nguyen, Common voice matters to Global South countries: Vietnam President, Hanoi Times, January 13, 2023

⁶ Global Issues, Population, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population>

⁷ The RCEP is a free trade agreement (FTA) between the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore,

works without an end in sight. India has stood by the strategic choice of not being part of any binding alliance - ideological, political or security-based, that could be detrimental to its national interest. Its solidarity with developing countries does not entail compromises with the interests of its own people, of whom 14.96 per cent continue to live below the poverty line⁸, the geo-political weight of the country notwithstanding.

India has stringently defended a non-negotiable stance concerning its maintaining of publicly funded food stocks, fisheries, and agricultural subsidies at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In 2023, India took the unilateral decision to suspend the export of non-basmati white rice to control inflationary pressures on domestic food prices and curtail the risks to national food security. India, along with Thailand, is one of the largest exporters of rice in the world. Its halting of rice exports has a significant impact on food security and inflation in other developing countries. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), several countries in Africa imported more than 80 per cent of their rice from India.⁹ Along the same lines, facing a relatively controlled first wave of COVID, India was active in supplying the COVAX vaccines to Africa as a gesture of its solidarity with other developing countries. However, in 2021, facing a devastating second wave, it halted the export of vaccines to Africa, putting the vaccination scheme of the continent in peril.¹⁰ Faced with similar contexts of national interests, India takes the same pathway as other developed countries. Given a repeat of such contexts, would other developing countries continue to see India as a reliable partner? In the past, relationships have been fraught: leaders from the African continent had publicly expressed their displeasure regarding incidents of racism against African citizens in India.¹¹

Thailand, Vietnam) and its five FTA partners (Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and Republic of Korea). Source: RCEP Secretariat; <https://rcepsec.org/official-documents/>

⁸ National Multidimensional Poverty Index- A Progress Review 2023, July 18, 2023, United Nations Development Programme, <https://www.undp.org/india/publications/national-multidimensional-poverty-index-progress-review-2023>

⁹ Joseph Glauber and Abdullah Mamun, India's new ban on rice exports: Potential threats to global supply, prices, and food security, July 25, 2023, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/indias-new-ban-rice-exports-potential-threats-global-supply-prices-and-food-security>

¹⁰ Ralf Peters and Divya Prabhakar, Export restrictions do not help fight COVID-19, June 11, 2021, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), <https://unctad.org/news/export-restrictions-do-not-help-fight-covid-19>

¹¹ Aggrey Mutambo, African diplomats skip event in protest over India 'racism and Afro-phobia', Thursday, May 26, 2016 — updated on July 02, 2020, Nation, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/african-diplomats-skip-event-in-protest-over-india-racism-and-afro-phobia--1201956>

In more concrete terms, with bilateral trade of 82.13 billion USD for the year 2022-23, India is Africa's third largest trading partner.¹² During the same period (2022-23), India's trade with ASEAN¹³ countries stood at 131.57 billion USD, while at USD 201.10 billion, its trade with North East Asia (NEA)¹⁴ accounted for 19.42 % of India's total trade in 2021-22. China was India's largest trading partner of the NEA states with a share of 43.12 per cent.¹⁵ Perceptibly, India's trade with Africa is relatively small when compared with ASEAN and NEA. However, almost half of its trade with NEA comes from China, highlighting the need for India to diversify and expand its trade relations with these regions. Moreover, unlike with Africa, India's trade balance with ASEAN and NEA countries is overwhelmingly negative. In Oceania¹⁶, except for Australia and New Zealand, India has yet to put in place a formal trade agreement, dialogue or engagement. To date, the Indo-Pacific is not recognised as a regional territorial trading division by the Indian Ministry of Commerce. However, just as India actively embraced and used the term 'global south' in its discourse at the G20, whether India would give more definition to the Indo-Pacific in terms of strategic, geographical, and trade considerations is anyone's guess.

On the investment front, India was the eighth largest host for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in 2021 and ranked third and second as the top destination for greenfield investment announcements and international project finance deals, respectively, according to the United Nations' World Investment Report 2023.¹⁷ The report also points out that in 2021, India was the 25th biggest source of FDI outflows. However, country-wide data on outward investments from India is hard to come by.¹⁸ This is further

¹² Paul Nantulya, La coopération entre l'Afrique et l'Inde, un point de repère en matière de partenariat, January 3, 2024, Centre d'Études Stratégiques de l'Afrique, <https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/la-cooperation-entre-lafrique-et-linde-un-point-de-repere-en-matiere-de-partenariat/>

Ronak Gopaldas, L'Inde lorgne l'Afrique dans sa quête de superpuissance, January 9, 2024, Institut d'Étude de Sécurité, <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/linde-lorgne-lafrique-dans-sa-quete-de-superpuissance>

¹³ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has the following countries as its members: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam, <https://asean.org/member-states/>

¹⁴ The Foreign Trade Territorial Division - North East Asia, deals with trade and economic cooperation with China PR, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Republic of Korea, Korea DP RP, Macao and Mongolia, Foreign Trade (North East Asia), Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and industry, Government of India, Last Updated: January 2, 2024, <https://commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-north-east-asia/>

¹⁵ Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and industry, Government of India, Last Updated: January 2, 2024, <https://commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-africa/>

¹⁶ India's Oceania Foreign Trade Division deals with India's bilateral trade relations with the following countries: Australia, New Zealand, Timor-Leste and Pacific Islands countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu etc.) Source: Foreign Trade (Oceania), Department of Commerce Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, Last Updated: January 2, 2024, <https://commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-oceania/>

¹⁷ UNCTAD, World Investment Report 2023, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2023_overview_en.pdf

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, 2023 Investment Climate Statements: India, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/india/>

substantiated by an OXFAM Discussion Paper by ICRIER, 2018¹⁹, which points out that in India, accurate data on actual investments rather than commitments or provisional flows is difficult to track. Furthermore, the paper states that the top destinations of India's investment: Mauritius, Singapore, UK, and the Netherlands share either of two characteristics – tax havens or host to an Indian diaspora. The business and trade potential generated by these investments is debatable and the country-centric investments flow can skew regional data. In Africa, for instance, the bulk of Indian investments have been directed to Mauritius.²⁰ And, while Indian exports to Africa consist mostly of manufactured goods, those from Africa to India are mostly made up of primary goods.²¹ Data on FDI demonstrates that while India has been successful in attracting FDI inflows, it is far from being a major source of regional FDI. Just as with trade, India is still to invest in diversity, connectivity, and integration on a regional scale.

To reiterate, India has often manifested an uncompromising, non-cooperative, and non-negotiable position on certain issues of direct national-interest and policy autonomy. These tendencies could be heightened under India's current regime, which insists on complete electoral dominance. Its intransigence on issues such as maintaining food stocks and fisheries and agricultural subsidies at the WTO, its refusal to join the RCEP, and its unilateral embargo on the export of vaccines or more recently, rice, are manifestations of its ability to risk multilateral co-operation without it having a bearing on its partnerships.

Furthermore, India has shown a preference for direct and singular engagement with regional partners where it can be the leading voice. The third summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Co-Operation organised in Papua New Guinea (the first of which was held in 2014) did not include Australia, New Zealand, and the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, which are members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).²² This exclusion is at odds with the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue between India, France, and Australia, and the latter two joining India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.²³ Clearly, Indian multi-alignment is prolific and does not find it contradictory nor unwieldy to engage with the same region and partners selectively through a plethora of platforms. India has been working on

¹⁹ OXFAM Discussion Paper, Deconstructing Indian Overseas Foreign Direct Investments, Historical and contemporary Trends, Authored by Divya Chaudhry, Priyanka Tomar and Pallavi Joshi Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), March 2018, https://icrier.org/pdf/Deconstructing_Indian_Overseas_FDI.pdf

²⁰ Malancha Chakrabarty, Indian investments in Africa: Scale, trends, and policy recommendations, Observer Research Foundation (ORF) Working Paper, May 2017

²¹ Joint Report by the African Trade Policy Centre and the Confederation of Indian Industry, March 2018, https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/africa-india_trade_and_investment_study_fin.pdf

²² Joanne Wallis and Premesha Saha, Modi in Papua New Guinea: leader of the global south or Quad partner? The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 24, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/modi-in-papua-new-guinea-leader-of-the-global-south-or-quad-partner/>

²³ India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue (4 May 2021), France diplomacy, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/news/article/india-france-australia-joint-statement-on-the-occasion-of-the-trilateral>

assuming centre stage and exclusivity in regional multilaterals, where it can don the mantle of the leader by the sheer heft of its size and economy and strengthen its hand when engaging with other member countries of the QUAD on a bilateral or multilateral basis. It desires to navigate and inhabit both worlds simultaneously from a unique position of strength. On the same lines, it insists on carving its own civilisational world view of the Indo-Pacific by evoking historical ties from a specific period of history that is conducive to its narrative of being the nodal civilisation in the region.²⁴ Having said that, the various bilateral and multilateral engagements of India beg the question of whether the country has the resources to deepen and sustain these expansive engagements over time.

Implications of India's Prolific Multilateralism for France and the EU

France counts on and supports India's rise as essential to the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.²⁵ This paper has pointed out how India still lacks resources when it comes to hard power, which make the risks of strengthening India, backsliding on its democratic credentials, appear much smaller when compared to the growing challenge posed by an autocratic China's palpable power and influence.

Considering the looming challenge posed by China, France is propelled towards a partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific, but how will these relationships evolve? Would India seek a closer military and security alliance with its western partners that goes beyond the purchase of arms and joint ventures in the defence industry? India's stringent stance on autonomy and sovereignty puts limits on its propensity to cooperate militarily and strategically. Moreover, close military cooperation in regions exposed to conflict as the Red Sea²⁶ could come with risks of India being identified as a western ally and disturb the delicate balance required of a persuasive multilateralism that insists on being a friend to all. Going by India's positioning, it shall focus on securing supply chains and enhanced commercial ties and cooperation in the defence industry, rather than explicit military alliances.

Having said that, the fast-changing landscape of international partnerships combined with the fraying of old bonds, as has been the case between India and the Maldives²⁷, compels India to innovate strategically and launch joint initiatives in countries of the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean, where

²⁴ India's Statement for Pacific Islands Forum (POF), Statement for Forum Dialogue Partners Session at the 50th Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

²⁵ « La pandémie peut être l'occasion et la raison même de développer notre partenariat avec l'Inde afin de renforcer la place de notre pays dans la zone indopacifique et de soutenir l'installation de l'Inde comme puissance internationale » L'Inde, un partenaire stratégique : Rapport d'information n° 584 (2019-2020), déposé le 1er juillet 2020, Senat Français ; <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r19-584/r19-5841.html>

²⁶ Robert Wright, Three killed in Houthi attack on cargo ship off Yemeni Coast, Financial Times, March 7, 2024

²⁷ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Modi trip to Indian islands prompts Maldives row, The Guardian, January 8, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/08/india-maldives-tensions-deepen-amid-tourism-row>

France is regarded more neutrally or is seen as a new partner to be cultivated. For France, manoeuvring India's deeper integration in the two regions could create an indirect rapprochement with other developing countries. Developing countries, however, may be reluctant to strengthen India over China, maintaining instead a competitive balance between the Asian giants that works to their benefit.²⁸ Furthermore, contrary to the overbearing Indian narrative of it being the leader of the global south having pushed for African Union's (AU) membership to the G20, the coverage by certain media and institutional platforms²⁹ in Africa has been a reminder of Africa's own long-standing push for membership, especially when Macky Sall, the president of Senegal, was at the helm of the AU.³⁰

In order to hedge against any future risk and keeping in mind India's stance on safeguarding its independence and autonomy, France should game out the long-term consequences of its relationship with India. The divergences on climate, investment protection, rights, rules, and laws are detrimental to long-lasting agreements. Furthermore, rather than being party to regional rivalry which could inflame tensions in a volatile region³¹, France and the EU should focus on strengthening regional organisations.

In a wider sense, to avoid a repeat of an AUKUS-like situation, France needs to work in concert with the European Union in order to achieve greater harmony between a realpolitik-oriented bilateral foreign policy and regional values. The EU needs unanimity on objectives and strategic foresight amongst its members when dealing with countries as large as India. The EU and France need a tempered relationship, which does not play into the domestic politics and showmanship of the current political dispensation in India. The popularity of the Indian prime minister is an important source of India's unilateralism. Indian foreign policy and the current political dispensation is deeply embedded in social media. On the other hand, the rise of extremes and coalition-based governments in the EU impose strong domestic constraints on the exercise of a consistent foreign policy with the EU as a guardian of values. The EU and France would need a new diplomacy that works on building a favourable context and narrative for its values and interests in the face of ever-changing geopolitical realities. Consistency on key issues and rules is integral to building trust. The EU and its member countries should usher in a period of pro-active, agenda-setting, and consensus-building multilateralism.

²⁸ Bhaso Ndzendze, Africa is being courted by China, Russia and the US. Why the continent shouldn't pick sides, The conversation, August 21, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/africa-is-being-courted-by-china-russia-and-the-us-why-the-continent-shouldnt-pick-sides-210516>

²⁹ Africa CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) Statement on the African Union's Recognition as a Permanent Member of the G20, <https://africacdc.org/news-item/africa-cdc-statement-on-the-africa-unions-recognition-as-a-permanent-member-of-the-g20/#:~:text=Africa%20CDC%20commends%20the%20G20,with%20a%20strong%20support%20to>

³⁰ L'Adhésion de l'Afrique au G20 : Une étape cruciale vers l'inclusion mondiale, Ministères des Affaires étrangères et des Sénégalais de l'Extérieur, République du Sénégal, 10 septembre, 2023, <https://diplomatie.gouv.sn/actualites/ladhesion-de-lafrique-au-g20-une-etape-cruciale-vers-linclusion-mondiale>

³¹ Sandeep Kumar, India's Geopolitical Rise in Context: Regional Implications", , Atlantic Council, May 22, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/indias-geopolitical-rise-in-context-regional-implications/>

To conclude, the lack of reforms exacerbates the lack of trust and risks further contestation and the breakdown of a system that neglects consensus and collective decision-making. The growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific could cast India in the same position as Saudi Arabia, where its domestic record³² is ignored for regional stability. India draws its geopolitical assertiveness from an acute awareness of the inconsistencies and limits of western diplomacy and foreign policy. While India's self-proclaimed leadership of the 'global south' can be contested, historic continuity and legitimacy of claims by developing countries gives their relationship a strong ideological base despite the inequalities and transactional aspects of their partnerships. Moving forward, for the purpose of strategic continuity, France and the EU need to advocate for a rules-based multilateralism that renews and reforms existing institutions instead of strengthening individual actors.

³² India was one of the top 10 countries with ongoing episodes of "stand-alone" autocratization. See: Democracy Winning and losing at the Ballot, Democracy Report 2024, V-Dem Institute, March 2024, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf