

# INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AS SEEN FROM A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE — “EQUIDISTANT DIPLOMACY” STRATEGY IN A MULTIPOLAR ERA —

Jun Moriguchi

MEA & South West Asia Dept., Global Economic & Political Studies Div.  
Mitsui & Co. Global Strategic Studies Institute

---

## SUMMARY

- India maintains a “special and privileged strategic partnership” with Russia. It is distancing itself from the movement led by Western countries to impose economic sanctions against Russia for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and is insisting that dialogue and diplomacy are the only way out for resolving the conflict.
- At the same time, a look at India’s neighbors shows heightening geopolitical risks, such as worsening relations with China and the political upheaval in Afghanistan. Although India has leaned toward the Japan-US-Australia-India QUAD alliance to counter-balance Chinese influence, it faced a scenario that it had hoped to avoid: the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, which brought the prospect of India’s adversary Pakistan strengthening its influence in the region. This has led India to harbor some distrust of the US.
- Even in today’s multipolar international political structure, India is trying to strengthen its presence by pursuing an “equidistant diplomacy” strategy under which it avoids taking the side of any one particular bloc.

---

## INTRODUCTION

India abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. Since then, the US and other Western countries have been urging India to reconsider its position<sup>1</sup>. India is avoiding favoring one side or the other and is maintaining “special and privileged” diplomatic relations with Russia, while at the same time participating in multilateral frameworks alongside Western countries with strained relations with Russia. As the world becomes increasingly divided over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, India is trying to strengthen its international presence by adhering to its policy of resolving the issue through dialogue and diplomacy, and by pursuing “equidistant diplomacy” with all blocs — Western countries, China and Russia, and emerging economies. This report provides an analysis of India’s diplomatic strategy of aspiring to a neutral position in today’s multipolar international political structure.

---

## 1. INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY BASED ON THE MACROSCOPIC VIEW OF EURASIA

### 1-1. India's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine

In his address to the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar clearly stated, “As the Ukraine conflict continues to rage, we are often asked whose

---

<sup>1</sup> Toru Ito, Tomohiko Satake, and Satoru Mori, “G7 and the QUAD: Broadening the reach of multilateral diplomacy” [in Japanese], *Diplomacy* Vol. 74, July/August 2022, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, pp 67-68, [http://www.gaiko-web.jp/test/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Vol74\\_p62-77\\_The\\_G7\\_and\\_the\\_Quad.pdf](http://www.gaiko-web.jp/test/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Vol74_p62-77_The_G7_and_the_Quad.pdf) (accessed October 4, 2022)

side are we on ... India is on the side of peace ... We are on the side that calls for dialogue and diplomacy as the only way out.” The speech avoids any mention of Russia by name, and reflects India's neutral diplomatic policy by sounding the alarm over international trends that are dividing the world. This attitude can also be gleaned from the fact that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin “today’s era is not an era of war” at the Indo-Russian bilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional cooperation framework in Asia led by China and Russia. While the momentum to impose further economic sanctions against Russia is growing, especially among Western countries, India is distancing itself from this trend. This is explained by what has been described as India’s “half-hearted approach<sup>2</sup>” to politics between major powers, and because the country believes it should not get involved in pressure or the use of force that could create divisions in the world.

## **1-2. Historical background behind the pursuit of the special and privileged friendship between India and Russia**

India's first Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a proponent of the Non-Aligned Movement and advocated that India refrain from joining any major military bloc. However, three wars with neighboring Pakistan and a border dispute with China led to a growing awareness of the threat from both countries, forcing a change in strategic thinking from the 1960s to the 1970s<sup>3</sup> and leading to the shift to become pro-Russia (then the Soviet Union). In other words, by building a friendly relationship with Russia, India sought to avoid isolation in Eurasia<sup>4</sup> and, at the same time, strengthen its military capability. Since the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971, India has been purchasing Russian-made military equipment. India also pragmatically enjoys security assurances, such as improved missile manufacturing capabilities, joint venture of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile with a view to selling it to third countries, and technical cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. In 2010, the two countries came to recognize their special and privileged strategic partnership in a joint statement issued at a summit meeting. However, in order to correct its overdependence on Russia, especially since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, India has diversified security cooperation through increased purchases of military equipment from the US, France, and Israel. As such, India has been meticulous in adjusting the distance between the country and Russia.

---

## **2. INDIA, WHILE LEANING TOWARD CONTAINMENT OF CHINA, MAINTAINS ITS OWN EQUIDISTANT DIPLOMACY**

### **2-1. Shifting from a policy of appeasement to confrontation with China**

The source of tension between India and China lies in the border dispute involving Tibet, a conflict that became definitive when the 14th Dalai Lama was exiled to India in 1959, leading to the Sino-Indian border dispute in 1962. Since then, no major clashes have occurred and relations had been calmed, but the relationship deteriorated again after the increasing deployment of both Indian and Chinese forces to the Doklam Plateau in June 2017 and the violent clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 (Figure 1). The latter incident resulted in the first fatalities on the border between the two countries in 45 years. Since then, both sides have continued to increase their deployment of troops to the disputed area. India has not signed on to any infrastructure development under China’s Belt and Road Initiative. However, with the strengthening market presence of Chinese smartphone companies and the proliferation of Chinese-made cell phones in India, it is as if India has

---

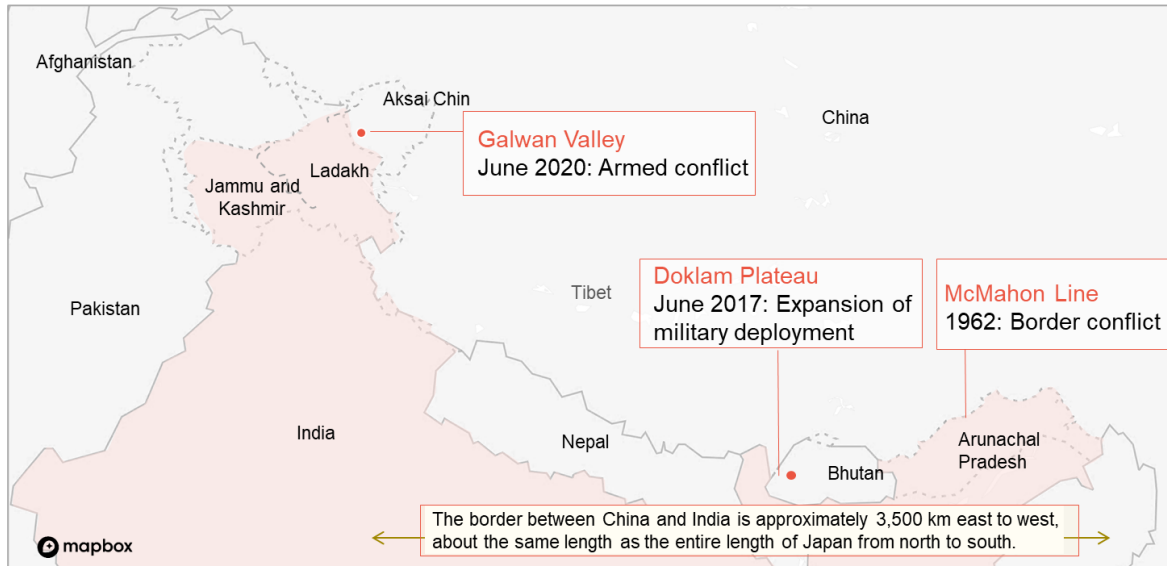
<sup>2</sup> Rahul Sagar ed, *To Raise a Fallen People: How Nineteenth-Century Indians Saw Their World and Shaped Ours*, Juggernaut Books, 2022, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Zorawar Daulet Singh, *Power and Diplomacy: India’s Foreign Policies during the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Toru Ito, “After Ukraine Invasion, India Struggles to Define Relations with ‘Special Partner’ Russia,” International Information Network Analysis IINA (Sasakawa Peace Foundation), Mar. 24, 2022, [https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/toru\\_ito\\_02.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/toru_ito_02.html) (accessed September 9, 2022)

been incorporated into the network of the virtual Belt and Road<sup>5</sup>. India is distrustful of these Chinese companies and has a system requiring prior government approval for investment from bordering countries. Although India does not mention China by name, its anti-China attitude is apparent, and the friction between the two nations is growing.

**Figure 1: Indo-China border and major areas of conflict in recent years**



Source: Compiled by MGSSI based on Mapbox & OpenStreetMap

## 2-2. Practicing equidistant diplomacy by participating in multiple multilateral cooperation frameworks

With no prospect of a thaw in India-China relations, India leaned toward the Japan-US-Australia-India QUAD alliance to counter-balance Chinese influence, and also confirmed cooperation in the areas of climate change adaptation and mitigation measures and infrastructure with the partner democracies. However, not to be interpreted as endorsing participation in the bloc against China, India has avoided agreeing to cooperation on security. India is also a part of the BRICS of five emerging nations that includes China and Russia, both of which have tense relations with the US. The statement from the meeting of BRICS foreign ministers in September 2022 suggests they are seeking to strengthen their presence amid the process of transforming the UN framework to a system better adapted to the multipolar era<sup>6</sup>. India, which also participates in the SCO, is trying to establish its position as the torchbearer for a benign and constructive form of regional cooperation by taking a stance that contrasts with that of China and Russia, that is, protecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity and pursuing peaceful solutions to disputes<sup>7</sup>. In addition, it participates in the new grouping called I2U2, which is the Middle East version of the QUAD, as well as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework IPEF (Figure 2). Furthermore, the country is also negotiating with the EU, the UK, and Australia on trade liberalization. The fact that India has been able to maintain balanced diplomatic relations with multiple countries in a multipolar

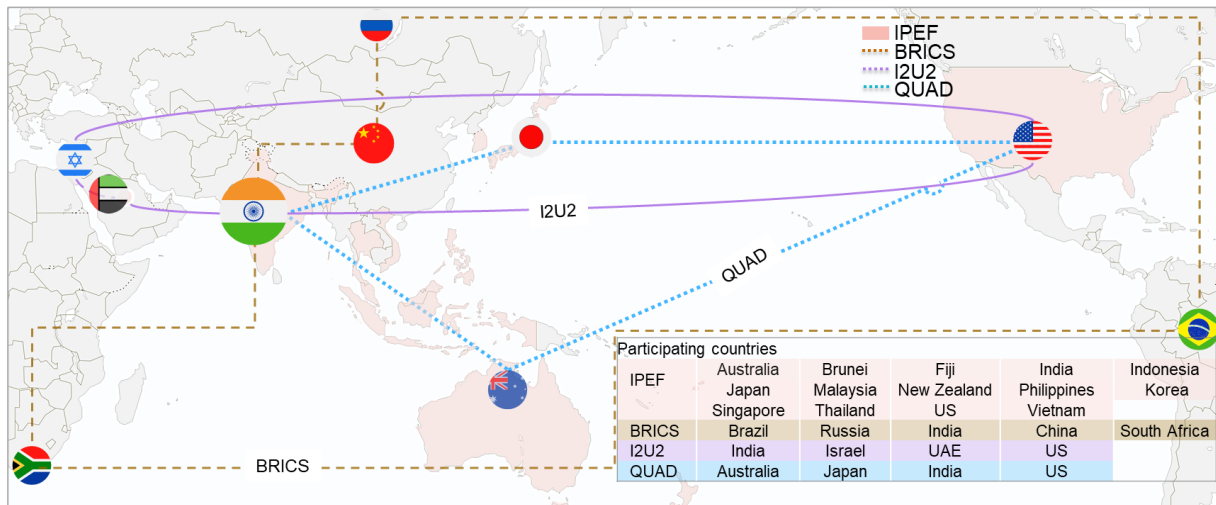
<sup>5</sup> Amit Bhandari et al., "Chinese Investments in India," Gateway House Report No.3/February 2020, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations, p.6., [https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Chinese-Investments-in-India-Report\\_2020\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Chinese-Investments-in-India-Report_2020_Final.pdf) (accessed October 4, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of Government of India, "Meeting of BRICS Ministers of Foreign Affairs and International Relations," May 19, 2022, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35330/Meeting\\_of\\_BRICS\\_Ministers\\_of\\_Foreign\\_AffairsInternational\\_Relations](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35330/Meeting_of_BRICS_Ministers_of_Foreign_AffairsInternational_Relations) (accessed October 4, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek et al., "Modi, Putin and Xi Join the SCO Summit Amid Turbulent Times," USIP, September 22, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/modi-putin-and-xi-join-sco-summit-amid-turbulent-times>, (accessed September 30, 2022)

international political structure can be the fruit of its independent diplomatic policy of avoiding alignment with any particular country.

**Figure 2: Multilateral frameworks in which India participates**



Source: Compiled by MGSSI based on Mapbox & OpenStreetMap

### 3. INDIA'S REGIONAL STRATEGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POLITICAL TURMOIL IN AFGHANISTAN

#### 3-1. India facing heightened geopolitical risks now that Taliban has gained control of Afghanistan

India has been involved in Afghanistan's nation building and reconstruction as well as socioeconomic development, including the construction of the parliament building and dam development. However, it became alarmed when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021 (Figure 3). This is because neighboring Pakistan, a country with which India has hostile relations, has a history of providing military assistance to the Taliban and has influence over the current Taliban interim government. Afghanistan, where the situation has been destabilized by the crumbling Taliban's administrative operations, could become a hideout for al-Qaeda, with which the West urged the Taliban to sever ties, and a base for armed groups, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), to conduct military training. The Taliban also maintains ties with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Islamic militant groups that have repeatedly carried out armed attacks in Indian territory, using Pakistan as their base of operations<sup>8</sup>. The current situation has undermined India's intended strategy of preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for terrorism against its homeland<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the withdrawal of US troops stationed in Afghanistan while the country was still in the process of stabilization ultimately resulted in the establishment of a Taliban interim government. This has made India skeptical of military intervention by the US and other Western countries.

#### 3-2. Strengthening connectivity with Central Asian countries

India positions Central Asia as part of its "extended neighborhood" because the region serves as a trade route to the landlocked countries of Eurasia<sup>10</sup>. "Extended neighborhood" is a term that describes India's view of the international order in recent years, and its scope includes the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Asia<sup>11</sup>. To strengthen its ties with Central Asian countries, India formulated its "Connect Central Asia" policy in 2012,

<sup>8</sup> Tim Willasey-Wilsey, "The Integrated Review and the withdrawal from Afghanistan," KING'S College LONDON, April 28, 2022, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/the-integrated-review-and-the-withdrawal-from-afghanistan> (accessed September 9, 2022)

<sup>9</sup> Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region," RAND, 2012, p.11., [https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP387.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP387.html) (accessed October 4, 2022)

<sup>10</sup> Rajiv Sikri, *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy*, SAGE, 2009, p.164.

<sup>11</sup> Kazutoshi Tamari, "India's view of the international order" [in Japanese], Kanagawa University Asian Review, Vol.06, March 2019, <http://asia.kanagawa-u.ac.jp/pdf/asia-review/vol06/paper5.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2022)

declaring its intention to promote political, economic, and cultural exchanges<sup>12</sup>. In announcing the policy, the then Indian Minister of External Affairs E. Ahamed communicated that “work[ing] towards converting Afghanistan into a hub for trade and energy, connecting Central and South Asia” would contribute to stability in the region.

However, not a single country recognized the Taliban interim government as legitimate rulers of the country when it swept into power in Afghanistan in August 2021, and India also decided to break off official diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. Under these circumstances, India hosted the first India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022. Discussions at the conference were focused on strengthening connectivity to build trade relations. To get to Central Asia from India, it is necessary to travel through Pakistan and Afghanistan, but overland passage through hostile Pakistan is not an option, meaning India’s access to the region is restricted. Regional connectivity will be essential to break through this geographic barrier. Originally, the plan was to access Central Asia via southwestern Afghanistan from the southern Iranian port of Chabahar, which the Indian government undertook the development (Figure 3), but the trade route did not function effectively after the political upheaval in Afghanistan and was abandoned. Hence, Stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan is key to strengthening connectivity between South and Central Asia.

**Figure 3: Three specific risks facing India with Afghanistan under Taliban control**



Source: Compiled by MGSSI based on Mapbox & OpenStreetMap

## CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR INDIA'S EQUIDISTANT DIPLOMACY

India has been pursuing the equidistant diplomacy strategy, believing there are more disadvantages than advantages to aligning with one particular bloc or another in the new multipolar international political structure. Moreover, the country has distanced itself from the trend in international affairs that is creating division in the world over the invasion of Ukraine, and will call on each country to resolve the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy. India is scheduled to assume the presidency of the G20 and SCO in 2023, and is expected to further strengthen its presence on the international stage.

This move by India to take the lead in foreign affairs reflects the government’s intention to solidify support in its domestic affairs toward the re-election of Prime Minister Modi in the general elections scheduled for 2024. India will likely continue to follow its own course of equidistant diplomacy.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of Government of India, “India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ Policy (Keynote address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue),” June 12, 2012, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/> (accessed September 20, 2022)