

INDIA'S 21ST CENTURY DILEMMA OF GLOBAL NON-ALIGNMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Our core values and national interests leave us no choice but to take on two tech powers at the same time

Immediately following World War II, global politics was largely defined by events of the Cold War. The political ideologies of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America represented two ends of the spectrum of a decidedly bipolar world, and tussles between the two shaped much of the history of the second half of the 20th century.

In many ways, the central rivalry of the period was the space race—a battle of one-upmanship that was kicked off by the Soviet Union when it became the first nation to put a satellite and then a human being into space. It was this evidence of technological superiority that forced US President John F. Kennedy to announce that the US was going to put a man on the moon—a promise that was kept by Neil Armstrong in July 1969.

The Cold War is largely anecdotal to me. The Moon landing took place two years before I was born, and within my first year of college, Moscow's glasnost and perestroika had brought the Berlin Wall down. Nevertheless, the idea of a world dominated by two superpowers has played a prominent part in the cultural back story of my formative years. As someone born in India in the early 70s, I was acutely aware of India's precarious position in the international world order and what it meant to be the citizen of a country that had chosen to remain non-aligned.

From the moment it gained independence from the British, India remained ideologically distant from the great powers that dominated the global stage at the time. We famously founded and led the Non-Aligned Movement, whose aim was to maintain national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of domination and interference by superpowers. As a result, in the early years, we were beholden neither to the USSR nor the US.

This ideological independence came at a considerable cost. Since we refused to take sides, many of the technologies that the superpowers shared freely with countries with which they were politically aligned were denied to us. We had to fend for ourselves, building technology missions like our fabled space project entirely from scratch, struggling to deal with the many crippling sanctions that were imposed on us whenever we demonstrated any sort of technological advancement. Sure, the few technology transfers we were able to wrangle came without strings attached, but the cost of not participating in the technological developments of the West took an undeniable toll on the development of science and technology in the country.

It was only after the liberalization of our economy that we began to regain lost ground. The growth of the Indian software industry and more recently the radical transformation of our internal consumer market through the phenomenal growth of e-commerce has allowed us to once again get some prominence on the world stage.

Unfortunately, just when Indian tech began to come into its own, the world slid into another cold war of sorts.

For decades, the US had been the undisputed leader of the tech world. But with China's emergence as a technology superpower, the world is no longer unipolar in the way it's been

since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Kai Fu Lee traces China's ascendancy to the moment when Alpha Go dethroned the reigning Go champion of his title. Go was believed to be a game that would forever remain beyond the ability of computers to master. So when a computer finally defeated the world's best human Go master, China reacted just like the US did when the USSR put a man in space—by pouring all its resources into building artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities. Thanks in equal measure to Beijing's cavalier attitude towards privacy and an unwavering focus on predictive accuracy, it is dominant in all areas of cognitive technology today.

And so, India once again finds itself in an unenviable position. Given our liberal, democratic traditions, we are more naturally aligned with US values of AI development, especially on issues related to privacy and AI ethics. Yet, our population demographics and history of economic development suggest that our path of technology development should adhere more closely to China's. Among the similarities, we both have to serve mobile-first markets and use our technology advantage for the larger public good.

But there are other reasons why India will find it difficult to align with either of this era's global technology super powers. Given the ever-present reality of our territorial dispute in Kashmir (particularly relevant right now), any long-term cooperation between India and China seems highly unlikely. And while we bear the US no such animosity, we have for a while now objected vociferously to the aggressive data practices of many American tech companies that operate in India. So much so that we have almost simultaneously implemented data localization regulations targeted at US companies and carried out an offensive against Chinese technology as well as telecom companies, culminating in New Delhi's recent ban of 59 Chinese apps.

This is not the first time India has chosen the path of non-alignment. But never before have we taken the fight to the dominant powers of the world in quite this manner. As important a market as India is, we will need to have tremendous fortitude to deal with the consequences that will inevitably follow. After all, who makes enemies of two global superpowers at the same time?

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