

THE 'INDIA POLE' IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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'India's recent or past statements on issues of global importance indicate that it tends to take positions that not just suit its interests but are also informed by its sense of being a unique player on the global stage' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

"Whose side is India on?" is one foundational question that constantly confronts practitioners, thinkers and commentators of India's foreign policy. The ongoing war in Ukraine on the one hand and the confrontation between Russia (India's traditional partner) and the United States and the West (also India's partners) on the other have increased the frequency/regularity of this question. So whose side is India on, after all? Is India with Russia or with the U.S./the West in this war? The problem with these rather unidimensional questions is that they habitually assume that there are just a few select sides in world politics, and India is not a side with any geopolitical agency of major consequence. Notably, India gets asked "Whose side are you on?" far more than China does, for China is viewed as a side.

When great powers seek India's support during geopolitical contestations, such as the one over Ukraine, they end up facing a stubborn India that is reluctant to toe the line. The inherent reason behind Indian reluctance, however, is not stubbornness but a sense of self which views itself as a pole in the international system, and not as a satellite state or a camp follower. India refuses to take sides because it views itself as a side whose interests are not accounted for by other camps or poles.

Some reflections on 'India as a pole' is perhaps appropriate at a time when India assumes the chair of the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), two institutions that are geopolitically significant today.

Indian policymakers, notwithstanding the relative material incapacity of the state, inherently think of themselves as a pole in the international system. New Delhi's constant exhortations of a multipolar world are also very much in tune with this thinking about itself as a pole in a multipolar world.

There is a rich history to it. The origins of this thought can be found in the character of the country's long struggle for independence; the pre and post-Independence articulations of leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhiji, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak among others on

international politics; the (not uncontested) primacy India inherited as the legatee state of the British empire in South Asia; India's larger than life civilisational sense of self; and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) experiment, have all contributed to India's desire for a unique foreign policy identity and a voice in the comity of nations. For much of its modern independent history, India's foreign policy has been a unique experiment. It has had its pitfalls, and has led to foreign policy mistakes, but that does not take away from its unique sense of external agency. Modern India's largely endogenous moorings have lent themselves to the self-assumed identity of a unique pole in a multipolar world. Herein lies the origin of a modern state which refuses to be led by another pole or easily aligned to one, but sees itself as a pole instead.

Historically, India's view of itself as a pole is evident in the manner in which it used to pursue non-alignment for several decades after Independence. Some vestiges of this continue to inform India's foreign policy to this day. It is also important to point out that India's non-alignment is often misunderstood given that a number of foreign commentators and practitioners interpret it as neutrality. For India, however, non-alignment is not neutrality, but the ability to take a position on a given issue on a case-by-case basis.

What does being a pole mean for India? The classical view of polarity is one of domination of the international system by the great powers, the balances of power by them, and alliance-building based on ideology or distribution of power for the purposes of such balancing. India, however, has a different view of itself as a pole. It has not actively sought to dominate the South Asian regional subsystem even when it could (even though it occasionally and reluctantly intervened, but often with disastrous consequences); its balancing behaviour has been subpar, it has refused to build alliances in the classical sense of the term, or sought camp followers or allegiances. As a matter of fact, even its occasional balancing behaviour (for instance, the 1971 India-Soviet Treaty during the Bangladesh war) was contingent on emergencies.

If India's idea of being a pole in the international system is not strictly governed by the classical understanding, what indeed are the various elements of India's idea of being a pole? For one, and to be fair, it does believe it has a strategic periphery in South Asia where it has a natural claim to primacy. Two, it discourages interference by other powers in that space. Three, it often tends to speak for 'underprivileged collectives', physical (South Asia) or otherwise (NAM, developing nations, global south, etc. in varying degrees); and it welcomes the rule of law and regional order. India's historical focus on the region has been more of a provider of common goods than as a rule setter or/of demander of allegiance. Could one say, without nationalistic overindulgence, that India's idea of being a pole is deeply entrenched in a normative framework? Perhaps.

If the above is a complicated but reasonably accurate description of India's sense of its place in the world, those seeking to win India over to one camp or another must note that New Delhi detests falling in line. India's recent or past statements on issues of global importance — be it Ukraine or Iraq, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's aerial campaign in Serbia, or bringing climate change to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) — indicate that it tends to take positions that not just suit its interests but are also informed by its sense of being a unique player on the global stage. This is key to understanding India's external behaviour.

Notwithstanding the geopolitical difficulties that India faces today, India is a pivotal power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, with an ability to help tackle security, climate and other challenges of global consequence. Western powers must, therefore, treat India as a partner rather than as a cheerleader. They should mainstream India into global institutions such as the UNSC, and consult India rather than dictate to India which side to take. The question to ask India is not "whose side are you on?" but "what is your side?".

As India becomes the chair of the G20 and the SCO in 2022, it will further seek to assert itself as a major pole in the international system, and dissuade demands to follow one camp or another. Therefore, those wishing to work with India on the global stage must learn to deal with the 'India pole'.

Happymon Jacob teaches at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and is the founder of Council for Strategic and Defence Research

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