

RAJESWARI PILLAI RAJAGOPALAN

## India's international stance

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party led government has been in office for a decade. There is little indication that it faces any significant political challenge for at least the next several years. This is more a result of the failure of India's opposition, especially the Congress party, rather than of significant achievements by the ruling party. Foreign policy is a good illustration: despite some perception of success, in reality, India faces continuing troubles with its most important adversary, China; difficulties in its relationship with its closest partner, the US; and an uncertain future with its traditional partner, Russia. With growing geopolitical uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, India has responded by becoming quite proactive in its multilateral engagements. Whether this suffices to manage all the challenges India faces remains to be seen.

### Continuing troubles with China

India's relationship with China continues to be troubled, with no long-term solution visible. Though the focus of the dispute is on the long and disputed border between the two countries, the crux of the matter is a long-standing political rivalry. India does not appear to have a clear response to dealing with the China challenge. Following the Galwan crisis in 2020, when an unexpected border clash left dozens of soldiers on both sides dead, India halted its regular political engagements with China, acted to reduce China's presence in the Indian economy and banned hundreds of Chinese apps in India, including TikTok. The diplomatic sulking had little impact on China. In recent months, small improvements appear to have been made to the ties between the two sides with the conclusion of the border patrol management agreement. However, the Indian External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, stated<sup>1</sup> quite clearly in the Indian parliament that these were "steps of a temporary and limited nature" meant "to obviate the possibility of further friction". Nevertheless, this has led to additional rounds of India-China track two dialogues.<sup>2</sup> This appears to be driven by two factors: (1) growing difficulties in the US-India relationship; and (2) India's continuing

1 "Statement by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar in Lok Sabha". Ministry of External Affairs, 3 December 2024.

2 Tweet, Aadil Brar (@aadilbrar), 23 December 2024.

trade dependency on China.<sup>3</sup> But large military forces remain along the border and political ties are still frosty, a condition unlikely to change in the near future.

## Difficulties in the US relationship

The India-US relationship has undergone transformative changes in the last two decades. While several factors helped build the close partnership between the two countries, common concerns about China have been particularly important. The US and India have a growing security partnership, including defence trade, which is running at over \$20 billion cumulatively over the last two decades.

However, there are also increasing difficulties in the relationship. Both sides have concerns about the other: the US is worried about India's slide towards illiberalism under Modi's Hindu Nationalist government, with questions about the treatment of minorities, freedom of expression and most recently, suspicions and accusations about Indian covert action in several Western countries targeting what the Indian government claims are terrorists and separatists targeting India. How the two sides deal with this issue remains to be seen, as is the question of whether the Trump administration will treat such issues in the same manner that the Biden administration did. While the relationship is likely to survive – both sides have too much at stake – there is growing wariness on both sides.

## Continuing relationship with Russia

India has had a decades-old steady relationship with Russia. Despite that, and especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is recognition in India of the cost of the Russian relationship. Therefore, there is a constant adjustment in how best to maintain that relationship so that the cost does not become too great. India argues that its relations with Russia prevent complete Russian dependence on China. However, as India is readjusting and recalibrating its relationship with Russia, there is also some cost to that recalibration. After the 2020 Sino-Indian border clash, Russia has not supported India, maintaining neutrality.

Moreover, the Russia-China relationship has deepened. The two have engaged in joint military exercises in the North Pacific. If their cooperation were to extend to a joint military exercise in the Indian Ocean, it could become more serious for India's relations with Russia. The other major obstacle is India's dependence on weapons from Russia, which limits India's freedom of taking a position on Russia's war against Ukraine. There are also increasing difficulties with supplies and spares for India's Russian-built military equipment. Despite two decades of efforts at defence trade diversification, the Soviet/Russian component of the Indian defence inventory is still around 70% to 80%. This will likely restrict India's autonomy for the foreseeable future.

3 Shetty, R. (2024) "India's reliance on China for critical minerals | Explained". *The Hindu*, 24 December.

## Minilateralism

The Galwan confrontation has been a game-changer for India's policy on China. It has altered the Indian perceptions of China in significant ways, pushing it to rethink its strategies in addressing the China challenge. Not wishing to depend solely on the US, India has developed a web of partnerships and a multi-aligned foreign policy by developing a 'minilateralist' option through building partnerships with groups of countries other than just the United States. Many of these groups, of course, include the US, such as the US-India-Japan group and Quad. Some are made up of others, such as the India-Australia-Japan group. And India continues to maintain its partnerships, such as the IBSA, RIC and BRICS, all of which originally had an anti-American tinge. But the effectiveness of such minilaterals remains to be seen.

Thus, the next couple of years will prove challenging for Indian foreign policymakers. The Trump administration adds another layer of uncertainty too, both in the bilateral relationship and in India's strategy to counterbalance China, which require active American assistance.