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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate decorative floral pattern in the bottom right corner, featuring multiple layers of stylized petals and geometric shapes.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THAN KIŪ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

INDIA 2023: TACTICAL WINS AND STRATEGIC SETBACKS IN FOREIGN POLICY?

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India had a busy and increasingly tumultuous year in foreign policy. New Delhi played host to both the Group of 20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, providing opportunities to shape agendas in multiple areas of global governance and international security. It used both presidencies to showcase the achievements of the Modi government, to demonstrate India's «convening power», and, at times, to frustrate others, especially China. But, during 2023, India also attracted global attention for other reasons. In the middle of year, the killing of a Sikh separatist in Canada led some to conclude that New Delhi was running a covert programme of targeted assassinations. That incident led to a major diplomatic dispute with Ottawa and was followed by evidence, uncovered by United States authorities, of an unsuccessful plot to assassinate another Sikh separatist. These events cast a shadow over India's strategic partnership with Washington. Towards the end of year, the outbreak of violence in Gaza brought the Modi government's Middle East policy – especially the strong relationship forged with Israel – under greater scrutiny. Both could prefigure strategic setbacks for India, this article argues.

KEYWORDS – India; Indian foreign policy; G20; China; targeted killings; Canada; Gaza

1. Introduction

Partly by design and partly by circumstance, the global spotlight shone brightly on India throughout 2023. With a national election looming in the first half of 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government was keen to display India's «convening power» in contemporary international affairs, as chair of both the Group of 20 (G20) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and as convener of two «Voice of the Global South» summits. These events allowed Modi to showcase *Naya Bharat* («New India») to tens of thousands of visiting politicians, officials, businesspeople, investors, and analysts, and to make the case to ordinary Indians that their country is now held in high esteem by the world, thanks to the astute diplomacy of the Prime Minister and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* («Indian People's Party» or BJP).

As the year wore on, however, India found itself the focus of international attention for other reasons. On 18 June 2023, a prominent Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, was shot by unidentified gunmen

outside a *gurdwara* in Surrey, near Vancouver, in the Canadian state of British Columbia [Pawson 2023, 19 June]. In the following hours and days, it was widely speculated that India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) had played some part in the killing. It soon became clear that this suspicion was shared by the Canadian government and at least some of Canada's allies, including the United States (US). On 18 September 2023, just over a week after the G20 summit in New Delhi, this belief was finally aired in public. In a dramatic statement to parliament, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that Canada's security agencies were «actively pursuing credible allegations» concerning the involvement of Indian officials in Nijjar's murder [Tasker 2023, 18 September].

This allegation plunged the bilateral relationship between Canada and India into crisis. New Delhi reacted angrily, designating Canada unsafe for Indian citizens, suspending visa services, and forcing the withdrawal of forty-one Canadian diplomats working in India [Bhattacharyya 2023, 20 October]. The accusation also cast a wider shadow. As the dispute developed, the extent of American concern about India's alleged actions concerning Nijjar and the fate of other actual or putative targets became evident. We now know that in a series of private meetings in September, October, and November, the US repeatedly pressed India to engage constructively with Ottawa's investigation [MacDonald 2023, 10 November]. Then came a surprising development. On 29 November 2023, US authorities unsealed an indictment alleging that an Indian citizen named Nikhil Gupta had collaborated with an Indian official in New Delhi to plot another assassination, this time in the US [Department of Justice 2023]. The target was not named in the indictment but was widely reported as New York-based Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, the high-profile leader of the «Sikhs for Justice» separatist group [Herman 2023, 22 November].

The suggestion that members of the Modi government were engaged in a programme of targeted killings prompted renewed scrutiny of the strategic partnerships forged with India by the US and its Indo-Pacific allies, including Australia and Japan [Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. While few analysts advocated breaking off or even winding back these relationships, in Washington, Canberra, Tokyo, and indeed London and further afield, questions were asked about the wisdom of deepening security ties with a country willing and able to act in such an unrestrained manner within the borders of supposedly friendly states [e.g. Chatterjee Miller 2023].

In this way and in others, the year saw what might be seen as a series of short-term tactical wins for New Delhi, but whether these successes advanced or undermined India's longer-term strategic interests is less clear.¹ To be sure, some of the wins were significant. In the G20 and SCO, and

1. Here I follow what I take to be the standard distinction between tactics – actions taken to achieve discrete ends – and strategy – the overarching plan to fulfil a broader set of larger objectives over time.

in other groupings, for example, India deployed considerable diplomatic skill to frustrate Chinese agendas and to forge closer ties with significant players, including in the Middle East, and the Global South [Hall 2023, 13 July; Manzoor, 2023, 10 September]. Modi's State Visit to Washington in June reaffirmed the commitment of both countries to their burgeoning technology partnership, especially the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), agreed late in 2022, and a memorandum of understanding facilitating the future manufacturing of US-designed jet engines in India [Ministry of External Affairs, 2023b]. Some might also claim, perhaps, that India's undeclared targeting killing programme paid dividends, eliminating a series of long-standing national security threats. By the end of the year, at least ten accused terrorists had been killed by unnamed assailants, including several apparently high-ranking militant Islamists resident in Pakistan [*The Times of India* 2023, 10 November].²

Yet at the same time, the Nijjar and Pannun affairs arguably undermined trust between New Delhi and the Western strategic partners India needs to help manage security challenges posed by China and Pakistan and others in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Throughout 2023, those challenges remained acute. By the end of the year, China remained in possession of the territory seized by stealth by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the first half of 2020. Military talks between India and China yielded only a few minor disengagements on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) [Pandit 2023, 12 October]. China continued to upgrade military infrastructure along the LAC and to step up its military and oceanographic presence in the Indian Ocean [Laskar 2023, 6 June]. Beijing did not wind back efforts to build influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region [Grossman 2023, 21 August]. And while China's leaders called on New Delhi to stabilise the relationship and work with Beijing in areas of mutual interest, they offered no concessions to India [*Xinhua* 2023, 25 July].

Nor did Pakistan, for that matter, despite that country's worsening economic malaise and increasingly fractious internal politics [Biswas 2023, 17 May]. While the India-Pakistan Line of Control remained relatively quiet, which could be seen as a success of sorts, no progress was made in improving relations between Islamabad and New Delhi [Chauhan 2023, 23 October]. To make matters worse for India, events elsewhere in the immediate region took problematic turns during 2023. In Afghanistan, the Taliban consolidated its control and pledged to work more closely with Beijing [Yunus Yarwar and Greenfield, 2023, 14 October]. In Myanmar, the military government with which India has remained engaged since the start of the civil war lost

2. Those killed in Pakistan include Mistry Zahoor Ibrahim of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) shot on 1 March; Paramjit Singh Panjwar of the Khalistan Commando Force, shot on 6 May; Riyaz Ahmad of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), shot on 8 September; Maulana Ziur Rahman, also of LeT, shot on 12 September; and Shahid Latif, a member of Jaish-e-Mohammad, shot on 12 October.

control of more territory [Myers 2023]. In the Maldives, a Presidential election was won by a candidate, Mohamed Muizzu, committed to upgrading the country's relationship with China and Muslim states and downgrading ties with India [Kapoor, 2023, 21 December]. In parallel, another election, this time in Bangladesh, exposed disagreements between New Delhi and strategic partners like the US [Shivamurthy 2023].

This paper explores this persistently difficult strategic predicament and other significant developments in 2023. The next section sets the scene, outlining India's position at the start of the year. The third examines one of New Delhi's biggest projects: its outreach to the Global South, using the G20 and other vehicles. The fourth returns to India's relations with the major powers; especially it examines the consequences of New Delhi's attempts to «soft balance» China, and the impact of the allegations of India-sponsored targeted killings on its partnerships with Western states. The fifth section then turns to India's balancing act in West Asia, which was made more precarious by Hamas' surprise attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the war in Gaza that followed. The conclusion provides a brief assessment of India's standing at the close of the year.

2. Promise and Purpose

Despite facing a complex set of strategic challenges, New Delhi began 2023 with purpose. The Modi government's determination to make the most of the G20 presidency was clear as soon as it took over the G20 presidency from Indonesia. At the Bali G20 Leaders' Summit on 15-16 November 2022, Modi himself promised that India would deliver not just an «inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented, and decisive» agenda, but also that it would promote a «universal sense of one-ness» or harmony between all living things [Modi 2022, 30 November].

Whether or not that latter objective could be achieved, at the start of 2023, New Delhi had reasons to feel confident. Prior to the Bali Summit (15-16 November 2022), many observers doubted that a final statement could be agreed among the G20 members, given differences between China and Russia, on the one hand, and the West, on the other, over Ukraine. Deft Indonesian and Indian diplomacy, however, eventually forged an agreement which included language mildly critical of Russia's aggression and acceptable to all [Press Trust of India 2022, 19 November]. This was no small achievement, balancing both Western and Russian concerns, and Chinese disapproval [Lawler and Allen-Ebrahimian 2022, 16 November]. For a time, at least, the Bali language appeared to offer India a way out of a messy situation New Delhi was compelled to manage in 2022, thanks to Vladimir Putin's adventurism and Western anger at Russia's aggression. Some ire had been directed at New Delhi, which refused to condemn Pu-

tin's actions and maintained an open channel of communication to Moscow, fearful that Russia might be forced into China's arms [Tellis 2022] and conscious of India's ongoing dependence on Russian-supplied weapons [Lalwani and Sagerstrom 2021], as well as scarce and sensitive technologies [Gupta, Amit 2022].

Beyond the Bali compromise, India also had other grounds to be positive. Despite the disagreements about Russia, during 2022 New Delhi had managed to further strengthen ties with its Quad partners: Australia, Japan, and the United States. The Tokyo Quad Summit in late May unveiled a series of new initiatives useful to India, not least the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and projects intended to enhance cooperation in basic science, advanced technologies, space, cyber-security, and the green energy transition [White House 2023]. The Quad foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to work together at a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2022 and convened again in New Delhi in March 2023. At that New Delhi meeting, the bonhomie among the Quad foreign ministers was evident. At the Raisina Dialogue, hosted by the Observer Research Foundation, they compared themselves the «The Beatles» in cheery exchanges with each other and with the audience [Roy 2023, 4 March].

Finally, New Delhi had managed the economic disruptions caused by the Ukraine conflict reasonably well, partly by buying up cheap Russian oil with Indian rupees, satisfying some of the country's own needs, and refining and on-selling more [Gamio *et al.* 2023, 22 June]. These actions allowed India to cushion its economy from some of the inflationary pressures that arose from the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia. Partly as a result, India's gross domestic product grew by 7.2% in the financial year 2022-23 [Mishra 2023, 31 May] and strong growth was predicted to continue through into 2023-24 [Seth 2023, 31 January].

3. *Reengaging the Global South*

Eager to capitalise on these achievements and make the most of the G20 presidency, New Delhi moved quickly to demonstrate India's convening power and to extend its influence, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the final days of 2022 and the first of 2023, Modi and India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr Subrahmanyam (conventionally «S») Jaishankar embarked on a round of telephone diplomacy, making calls to the leader or foreign ministers of most than a hundred developing countries. On 12-13 January 2023, India held a virtual «Voice of the Global South Summit» with participants from 125 states, including 47 from Africa [Pradhan 2023, 19 January]. New Delhi promised to use the meeting to gather up ideas – especially concerning the reform of international institutions, common but

differentiated responsibilities on issues like climate change, and the challenge of inclusive development – to feed into the India’s G20 agenda [Roy 2023, 14 January].

These moves reflected a growing concern in New Delhi that India had unduly neglected the Global South in recent years. For two decades, as C. Raja Mohan rightly observed in the aftermath of the summit, India had focused most of its attention on «restructuring its great power relations» while «promoting greater cooperation and connectivity in the near and extended neighbourhood» [Mohan 2023]. Throughout this period, India’s ties with most of the developing world beyond South Asia were recognised as important, but were not prioritised. Indeed, successive governments, including Modi’s, showed little interest in fora like the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, favouring alternatives like the BRICS (which brings together Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa) or the G20. These groupings allowed India to work more closely with the major powers [Ganguly 2016, 19 September] and offered New Delhi higher status in the international community.³

This approach was not without costs. Over the past two decades, New Delhi has lost ground to China in the battle for influence in the Global South, especially in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific [Cooper 2021]. The January Summit was intended to respond to that challenge. It aimed to boost India’s influence and thereby reshape institutions and processes of global governance to better fit India’s interests [Akita 2023, 1 April]. So was New Delhi’s ultimately successful push to give the African Union a seat at the table at the G20, alongside the European Union. A series of visits by the Foreign Minister to developing states in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific had similar objectives. In 2022, Jaishankar ranged further afield than most recent Indian foreign ministers, heading to Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, as well as Botswana, Ethiopia, and Kenya [Gupta, Shishir 2022, 30 August]. During 2023, Jaishankar travelled further still, visiting Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania to signal India’s renewed interest in African partners, to Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Panama in Central and South America [Seshasayee 2023, 5 May], and to Fiji in the Pacific.

In May, Modi also became the first Indian prime minister to visit Papua New Guinea (PNG). There he attended the summit meeting of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), a grouping launched in Fiji in 2014. FIPIC connects India with fourteen Pacific Island states to work on trade, investment, energy, physical and digital infrastructure, and people-to-people ties. Modi had earlier attended the Fiji meeting and the subsequent one in Jaipur in India in August 2015, but then FIPIC went into something of a hiatus. Its revival in May 2023 was India-driven and reflec-

3. On India’s enduring concern with status, see Basrur and Sullivan de Estrada 2019.

tive of New Delhi's mounting anxiety about Chinese influence in the Pacific [Parashar 2023, 23 May]. For that reason, Modi brought a twelve-point action plan for closer ties and the promise that India wanted to be an active development partner for the region, helping to keep it «free and open», and providing an alternative to China [Modi 2023a].

Several other Global South-focused initiatives followed in the second half of 2023. Two were revealed on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. The first was a Global Biofuel Alliance (GBA) that aimed to develop and promote sustainable fuels, bringing together India with Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Italy, Mauritius, Singapore, and the US. The second was more contentious: an agreement among the IBSA grouping, comprising India, Brazil, and South Africa, to work more closely together to reform multi-lateral development financing. This initiative came as a surprise to some observers, as IBSA had been dormant for several years, as the larger BRICS minilateral forged ahead. Few missed the fact, however, that both the new GBA and IBSA project excluded China. This was in keeping with New Delhi's broader effort – discussed in the next section – to frustrate and forestall Beijing's ambitions [Hall 2023, 11 September].

India completed this push for influence with a second Global South Summit held online on 17 November. Modi introduced the opening session and highlighted what he deemed were the achievements of India's G20 presidency: the admission of the African Union; promises to reform the development banks and provide funds for the green transition; commitments to realise the Sustainable Development Goals; and pledges concerning artificial intelligence, digital payments, and disaster resilient infrastructure [Modi 2023b].

This event was overshadowed by the war in Gaza, however – a conflict that divided the attendees, despite Modi's call for solidarity [*The Wire* 2023, 18 November]. That conflict also threatened New Delhi's efforts to forge partnerships across West Asia and pursue projects beneficial to India. These included initiatives like an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled by Modi just two months earlier at the G20 Summit, and intended to connect India to Europe via Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [*Al Jazeera* 2023, 9 September]. This scheme now has no clear timetable for completion. Other Indian projects, including the so-called «Middle East Quad», comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the US, launched in late 2021, known as I2U2, were also sidelined [Alhasan and Solanki 2023, 16 November].

4. *Tactics and Strategy*

The demands imposed by the hundreds of meetings held across India under the auspices of the G20 stretched its notoriously over-worked diplo-

mats. Yet throughout 2023 New Delhi's foreign policy and national security establishment was also busy in other areas.⁴ In part, this was due to India's engagement with an ever-growing number of multilateral and minilateral groupings, including the BRICS, East Asia Summit (EAS), FIPIC, IBSA, I2U2, Quad, and SCO. Each of these required New Delhi's energy during the year, to advance or defend India's interests, or stymie others' agendas, or simply to ensure that a suitable representative and delegation could attend meetings. But in part too, India's officials were busy because the Modi government was keen for India to be assertive concerning perceived adversaries. Two received the most attention: China and foreign-based separatists, including militant Islamists focused on Kashmir and advocates of an independent Sikh state of «Khalistan».⁵

4.1. *Soft Balancing China*

New Delhi was more subtle in its approach to managing China.⁶ Unable and unwilling to attempt to dislodge the PLA from the positions Chinese troops had seized in 2020, India persisted with a diplomatic strategy with four elements developed during 2021 and 2022 [Gokhale 2021; Torri 2022]. The first part of this strategy was rhetorical: the public insistence that what occurred before, during, and after the Galwan clash cannot and will not be seen normal – as minor incidents or disputes like the others that have periodically occurred along the LAC since China seized control of Tibet in 1950. Throughout 2023, New Delhi maintained that what the PLA did in transgressing so aggressively and in grabbing territory was extraordinary and unacceptable, and that Beijing bears sole responsibility for remedying the situation. To emphasise this point, EAM Jaishankar repeatedly declared that New Delhi cannot abide by the tacit agreement struck in the 1990s between China and India to set aside their differences over the LAC and deepen cooperation in other areas of the bilateral relationship. Instead, Jaishankar argued, Beijing must return to the *status quo ante* 2020 before India will work with China again in those areas [*The Times of India* 2023, 27 September].

The second element consisted of military pressure along the LAC, exerted by the persistent deployment, all year round, of significant numbers of Indian troops into the border areas, and by the accelerated development of related infrastructure. Three army divisions have been stationed in Lada-

4. India's foreign service is tiny, with «A» officers numbering just over 1000. For a deeper look, see Bajpai and Chong 2019.

5. For a useful account of the history of the Khalistan movement, see Van Dyke 2009.

6. This subtlety is a function of necessity: the power imbalance between the two has widened significantly over the past forty years. For a critical analysis of the «evasive balancing» strategy New Delhi has adopted in response, see Rajagopalan 2020.

kh since the 2020 crisis – two more than usual – plus tanks, artillery, helicopters, and various fixed-wing aircraft and drones [Tarapore 2021]. In total, at the end of 2023, India was maintaining around 50-60,000 troops on the western sector of the LAC. Moreover, following clashes in the eastern sector late in 2022, additional forces have also been deployed into Arunachal Pradesh and new roads built to better manage Chinese incursions [Wallen 2023, 19 December].

The third part of this strategy involved strengthening India's ties with strategic partners, including the other members of the Quad [Tarapore 2023]. Since 2022, if not before, New Delhi has been energetic since 2021 in working more closely with Australia, Japan, and the US within the Quad in multiple areas: in artificial intelligence, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, climate change, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, infrastructure financing, maritime security, minerals, and supply chains [Madan 2022]. Beyond the Quad, it also continued throughout 2023 to develop closer bilateral defence and security relationships with all three countries [Mehta and George 2022; Siddiqui 2023, 20 March; Vergun 2023], and with others, including France [Balachandran 2023] and Singapore [TNN 2023, 2 November]. These moves were intended to bolster interoperability as well as building habits of cooperation, permit greater information sharing, foster defence industry partnerships and technology transfer, and facilitate arms sales.

The final element in India's evolving approach to managing China is what we might call «soft balancing» within multilateral institutions and minilateral groupings. Soft balancing can be defined as the «use of non-military tools to delay, frustrate and undermine» [Pape 2005: 10] often involving «limited, tacit, or indirect balancing strategies largely through coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliances» [Paul 2005: 58]. Throughout 2023, there is much evidence that India engaged in soft balancing of China across several forums, seeking to stymie Beijing's agendas. This was clear at the G20, as we have already seen, and was widely commented upon inside and outside China [Reuters 2023, 9 September]. But it was also evident within the BRICS and even the China- and Russia-dominated SCO, which India joined in 2017.

This soft balancing took multiple forms. At the G20, it involved sidelining China, and forming other groupings, like the biofuel alliance, or using existing groupings, like the hitherto moribund IBSA, which India revitalised to provide a platform for a new campaign for the reform of multilateral development banks [Hall 2023, 11 September]. At the BRICS Summit, hosted by South Africa on 22 to 24 August, it involved more direct opposition, especially to Beijing's plan to open the forum to new members, including Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. New Delhi eventually dropped its objections, but the point was made – China cannot assume that India will support an effort to turn the BRICS into

a Beijing-led anti-Western alternative to the Group of 7 (G7) [du Plessis, Miridzhanian and Acharya 2023, 25 August]. At the SCO, which New Delhi chaired during 2023, India's approach was more circumspect, but still focused on frustrating Chinese objectives [Lo 2023, 6 July]. Citing scheduling issues, New Delhi held the set-piece SCO Summit online, refused to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and focused the agenda on light issues – innovation, traditional medicine, and digital inclusion – rather than the security challenges that are the organisation's usual preoccupations [Hall 2023, 13 July].

Beijing was clearly irritated by India's actions in these and other forums. Xi Jinping's refusal to attend the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September – also officially blamed on scheduling difficulties – was likely a rebuke, as well as an attempt to minimise embarrassment on China's part [Paramesha 2023, 8 September]. But whether India's tactics had strategic effect is not yet obvious.

4.2. *Targeted Killing*

India's approach to countering perceived non-state threats was less subtle. In late February 2023, the Indian media reported the death of Bashir Ahmad Pir (also known as Imtiyaz Alam) in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi. Allegedly a top Hizbul Mujahideen commander, Ahmad was shot by unidentified gunmen [Basu 2023, 21 February]. A few days later, Syed Khalid Raza, said to be a former member of the militant group Al Badr, was killed in Karachi [*Hindustan Times* 2023, 27 February]. A few days after that Syed Noor Shalobar, an alleged Islamic State Khorasan commander, was shot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on or around 4 March [ANI 2023, 6 March].

This spate of killings was not unprecedented – there were several in 2022, including the shooting of Zahoor Mistry Ibrahim, a long-time Jaish-e-Mohammed operative who participated in a notorious hijacking in 1999, in Karachi in March [Shekhar 2022, 9 March]. However, they did not attract much attention beyond South Asia. But then came a series of incidents involving Sikh separatists. On 6 May Paramjit Singh Panjwar, long-time head of the so-called Khalistan Commando Force, who had played a prominent role in the insurgency in Punjab in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was shot in Lahore [Press Trust of India 2023, 7 May]. A month later, in mid-June, Avtar Singh Khanda, a 35-year-old Sikh activist, died in a hospital in Birmingham in the United Kingdom (UK). Khanda had earlier led a protest outside the Indian High Commission in London, during which he helped to pull down India's flag from the building. Media reports cited blood cancer as Khanda's cause of death, but some followers soon suggested he was poisoned [The Tribune 2023, 15 June]. Finally, a few days after Khanda's death, the high-profile Sikh activist Nijjar was shot in Canada.

These cases, well publicised not just in the Indian media but also by Sikh separatist outlets, attracted global interest. And without good expla-

nations for what had occurred, international scrutiny of the killings intensified. Soon after Nijjar's death, the theory began to circulate that India had played some role in his murder [Macdonald *et al.* 2023, 19 June]. So, indeed, did the idea that New Delhi was running a bigger targeted killing programme [Southern 2023, 20 June]. These suspicions were not allayed by the response of leading Indian media outlets. Many adhered to the official line that New Delhi had not been involved in the murders. But at the same time some welcomed the killings and suggested that they sent strong signals to India's enemies and the countries that harboured them [e.g. Joshi 2023, 20 June].

It is now known that the Canadian government suspected Indian government involvement in Nijjar's death soon after the shooting. In August and September, in the run-up to the New Delhi G20 summit, Canadian National Security Advisor Jody Thomas travelled to India twice to convey Ottawa's concerns to her counterpart, Ajit Doval. They were raised once more by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a bilateral meeting with Modi on the sidelines of the summit [Sharma 2023, 4 October]. During this time, Canada appears also to have discussed the issue with allies and partners, including the so-called «Five Eyes» intelligence group, which includes Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. Additional information about the killing may have been communicated to Ottawa by at least one Five Eyes partner [Akbarzai *et al.* 2023, 24 September].

Up to the G20 summit, India simply denied any suggestion that Indian officials had had a hand in Nijjar's murder. On 18 September, a frustrated Trudeau finally went public, outlining Canada's suspicions in a statement to parliament. At the same time, Canada took the serious step of naming and expelling Pavan Kumar Rai, the Ottawa station chief of India's foreign intelligence service, R&AW [Rajghatta 2023, 19 September]. New Delhi reacted with fury and expelled the top representative of Canada's external intelligence agency at its High Commission. Further measures followed, including the removal of two-thirds of the Canadian diplomats serving in India, all without any admission of culpability by New Delhi, nor a public promise to cooperate with the Canada's investigation of Nijjar's shooting. Instead, the official relationship between Canada and India entered a deep freeze, with neither side willing to break the ice [Nossal 2023, 15 October].

For about two months after Trudeau's speech to parliament, it appeared that this issue might remain bilateral. On 22 November this situation changed, however, with the claim that in June US authorities had foiled an alleged plot to murder the prominent Khalistani and joint Canadian and US citizen Gurbatwant Singh Pannun. A week later, the indictment concerning this case was unsealed by the Department of Justice, making clear the nature of the charges against one of the alleged co-conspirators, Nikhil Gupta, and an unnamed Indian official in New Delhi the investigating authorities claimed had directed the plot [Department of Justice 2023]. At

this point, it became clear that the US had been concerned about India's behaviour since at least June 2023, if not earlier.

4.3. *Tactical Assertion and Strategic Precarity*

New Delhi's reaction to the US indictment was markedly different to its visceral response to the earlier Canadian allegations [Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. Some Indian commentators fulminated about «Deep State» links to Sikh separatists, conspiracies to sabotage relations with the US, and Pakistani skulduggery [Talukdar 2023, 24 November]. But the official response was restrained. The MEA argued that assassinations on foreign soil were «contrary to government policy» and noted that the government had set up a «high-level enquiry committee» to scrutinise information provided by the US on the «nexus between organised criminals, gun runners and terrorists» [*Hindustan Times* 2023, 30 November]. No admission of involvement in a plot to kill Pannun was made, but equally, no angry statements were issued, no diplomats were expelled, and no visa processes suspended.

For good reason, authoritative analysts observed that this muted response likely reflected concern in New Delhi about the potential impact of the Pannun case on the US-India strategic partnership [Moriyasu and Sharma 2023, 28 November; cf. Ganguly 2023, 29 November]. Just a fortnight before the allegations of the murder plot were aired, the importance and the foundations of the relationship had been emphasised at the 2+2 foreign and defence ministers meeting. The meeting had brought Jaishankar and Rajnath Singh together with their American colleagues, Antony J. Blinken and Lloyd J. Austin III. Observing that both countries held the view that their partnership had been built on «trust and mutual understanding», the Joint Statement issued after the meeting outlined all the work underway to further cooperation in defence, counterterrorism, law enforcement, science and technology, health, trade, and infrastructure [US Department of Defense 2023].

New Delhi needs these initiatives to succeed, as well as those announced earlier in the year during Modi's State Visit, given their importance for India's economic and social development, as well as its national security. The iCET programme, American investment to build a semiconductor industry, defence and space collaboration, cooperation in advanced areas like artificial intelligence and quantum computing, joint work on energy transition and sustainable development, all have immense potential for India (Ministry of External Affairs 2023a). Regional diplomatic coordination and information sharing are arguably crucial to New Delhi helping to construct the multipolar Indo-Pacific the Modi administration declares that it seeks [see Jaishankar 2024]. And from Washington's point of view, India may still be «America's best bet in the Indo-Pacific», as Arzan Tarapore [2023, 29 May] has argued, to assist with managing a truculent China.

Yet the Pannun affair and the evidence of an apparent targeted killing programme appears to have undermined trust in the US and shaken

the case for deeper engagement [Galani 2023, 1 December]. It has likely further divided a foreign policy establishment split over the value of the strategic partnership. These divisions have been evident for some time and are unlikely to disappear soon, given the revelations concerning Nijjar and Pannun. They were exposed in 2022 due to New Delhi's refusal to criticise Russian aggression in Ukraine and India's purchases of huge quantities of Russian oil. They were obvious once more in the first half of 2023, well before Nijjar was gunned down in Canada, fed by anxiety about India's strategic intentions and relative weakness *vis-a-vis* China [Tellis 2023, 1 May] and the Modi's government's apparent «autocratic turn» [Markey 2023]. The Pannun case likely fed those doubts and widened existing divisions in the US, offering as it did «ammunition to those inside the US government and elsewhere who question the wisdom of trusting India», in Daniel Markey's words [Lakshman 2023, 5 December]. At the time of writing, the affair had not ended, despite the reported conclusion of an internal investigation by India and the transfer of one or more «rogue» R&AW officials to another part of the bureaucracy [*Hindustan Times*, 2024, 21 March].

5. *Maintaining Balance in West Asia*

The outbreak of hostilities in Gaza following Hamas' breakout from the territory on 7 October added a further complication – with uncertain implications – to India's international relations. Since the end of the Cold War, successive Indian governments have tried to forge close partnerships with most of the major military and economic powers of what India sees as «West Asia» regardless of the disputes they might have between them [Blarel 2022]. Since 2014, the Modi government has leant more heavily into the relationships with Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but in general it has pursued a strategy of regional «multialignment», aiming for good relations with most of states in the Middle East [Quamar 2023].⁷ The Gaza war threatened and continues to threaten to undermine that approach, forcing harder choices on India than it has faced for at least thirty years.

During the Cold War, the issue was clearer cut. Early on, New Delhi positioned itself as a prominent champion of the Palestinian cause. In 1947 India voted against the partition of Palestine and in 1949 against the admission of Israel into the UN, though it begrudgingly recognised the new state a year later. In the early 1970s, New Delhi intensified its concern once more, forging close ties with the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation). But its motives for this move were more mixed: socialist and «anti-imperialist» solidarity played a part, but so did material and geostrategic concerns. After

7. On the concept and practice of «multialignment», see Hall 2016.

the 1971 war with Pakistan, in which most Arab states sided with Islamabad, New Delhi was keen to ensure oil and remittances continued to flow from the Gulf and eager to investigate whether a wedge might be driven between Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world [Ginat 2004].

In the late 1980s, however, New Delhi began to develop closer ties with Israel, finally establishing full diplomatic relations in 1992 under P. V. Narasimha Rao's Congress-led government.⁸ Again, India's motives were mixed. Facing an upsurge of violence in Kashmir, New Delhi was disappointed at the lack of even tacit support from Arab states. At the same time, India was also increasingly interested in Israel as a supplier of much-needed advanced defence technology, and later information technology too [Blarel 2014]. By the end of the 1990s, moreover, some Hindu nationalists came to see Israel as a model manager of militant Islamism and sought to learn lessons learned by Tel Aviv to apply within and beyond India's borders [Karram 2022].⁹

For all these reasons, the current BJP-led government has persisted with the engagement of Israel and constructed a strategic partnership, formalised when Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit the country in 2017 [Kumaraswamy 2023]. Simultaneously, however, it has also deepened and broadened ties with key Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, which agreed in early 2019 to form another of India's strategic partnerships [Sabarin 2019, 20 February], and the other GCC states. Economic, human, and strategic interests have driven this process, as India looks to boost trade and investment, ensure oil supplies, improve the wellbeing of Indian citizens working in the Gulf, and weaken Arab state support for Pakistan [Quamar 2023].

This strategy of parallel engagement of Israel and the GCC states, while maintaining strong ties with Iran, depends on two conditions: a stable security situation across most (if not perhaps all) of the Middle East and progress towards normalising relations between Israel and the Gulf Arab states. India's persistence over the past decade or so have allowed it to engage with multiple partners at once, without being dragged into regional disputes and without having to make substantive trade-offs, with neither Israel nor the Gulf Arab states applying conditions to strong relations. The Gaza war has already upset that balance and could generate greater instability, to the detriment of India's interests. It has likely left projects like the IMEC corridor stranded and could well stymie initiatives like the nascent I2U2 Middle East Quad [Haidar 2023, 20 November].

More broadly, the Gaza war brought more scrutiny of India's strategic partnership with Israel and the ideological alignment of parts of the Hindu Right with hard-line Israelis, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [e.g. Blarel 2023, 17 November; Storey 2023, 16 November]. And with

8. Israel was earlier permitted to open a consulate in Bombay / Mumbai.

9. Some scholars (for example, Sen 2015) also observe similarities in Hindu nationalist and Zionist ideology.

this scrutiny came suggestions that India's ties with the Arab states might suffer if she was too supportive of Tel Aviv [*The Economic Times* 2023, 11 October]. To some degree, these changed circumstances help explain the shifts in New Delhi's approach to the Gaza war in the latter part of 2023.

Immediately after Hamas' assault, Modi telephoned to Netanyahu to tell him that «people of India stand in solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour» and to reiterate New Delhi's unequivocal condemnation of terrorism [Ministry of External Affairs, 2023b]. On 26 October, India then abstained in a UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote calling for a ceasefire, notwithstanding a verbal call for de-escalation [United Nations, 2023]. At the same time, an Indian foreign ministry spokesperson called for the «immediate and unconditional release» of the hostages taken by Hamas [Press Trust of India 2023, 9 November]. Then on 7 November, New Delhi banned pro-Palestinian public protests in Kashmir [Hussein and Saaliq 2023, 8 November]. Thereafter, however, India's stance changed, amid domestic debate about the government's initial strong backing of Israel and concern about its impact on ties with other states. At the second virtual Global South summit on 17 November, Modi called terrorism «unacceptable» but stated that New Delhi «strongly condemns the death of civilians» in the conflict [Associated Press 2023, 17 November]. Public attention was also drawn to India's provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza [Chitre 2023, 19 November]. Finally, in mid-December, India voted for a UNGA resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire [Roy 2023, 14 December].

6. Conclusion

These modifications to India's approach to the Gaza conflict aimed at reducing the risk that New Delhi's closeness to Tel Aviv might undo the progress it had made in building partnerships in the Gulf and rebuilding influence in the Global South – at avoiding, in other words, another strategic setback. They drew attention to the fundamentals of India's circumstances. India needs stability and predictability to ensure the sustained economic growth New Delhi requires to deliver social development and enhance national security. In the decade since the Modi government came to power, however, stability and predictability have been in short supply, thanks to China's assertiveness, the rise of Donald J. Trump, a global pandemic, Putin's adventurism, and latterly, a return to war in the Middle East. New Delhi is not so naïve as to think that international affairs will always be stable or predictable, of course, but it is fair to observe that recent events have not been kind to India.¹⁰

10. On the prominence of uncertainty in Indian official thinking, see Jaisankar 2020.

At the same time, it might be noted that the Modi government's *Realpolitik* may not always improve New Delhi's position. This may be one lesson of 2023. Whatever success India had in undermining Chinese agendas in multilateral and unilateral settings and in restoring influence in the developing world was arguably undercut by irritation in the West at India's targeting of enemies overseas, especially of Sikh separatists, and in the Muslim world at India's closeness to Israel. It is not yet clear how the first issue will play out, but trust and confidence in India appears to have been affected, with uncertain implications for strategic partnerships in which both New Delhi and Western states have invested much in recent years. Nor is the lasting impact of the Modi government's early backing of Netanyahu against Hamas obvious, but again, there is some evidence that some damage has been done to India's relations with the Arab states. For these reasons, it is hard to conclude that India ended 2023 in a stronger position than the one with which it started the year.

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