

India: Modi-fied Status

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Suggested citation: Sophie Eisentraut, “India: Modi-fied Status,” in: Tobias Bunde/Sophie Eisentraut/Leonard Schütte (eds.), *Munich Security Report 2025: Multipolarization*, Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2025, 87–93,
<http://doi.org/10.47342/EZUC8623-6>.



Modi-fied Status

What is at the core of Indian leaders' criticism of the international order? What role does multi-alignment play in New Delhi's pursuit of a global leadership role? And which domestic factors pose a risk to India's global ambitions?

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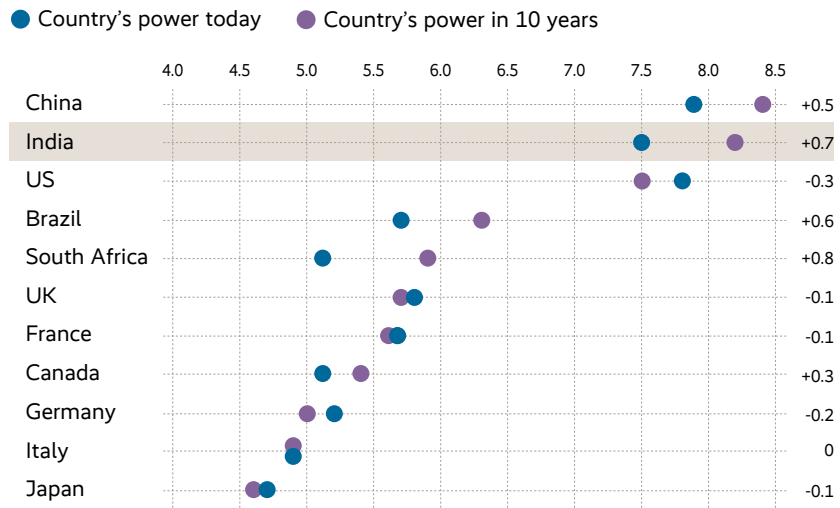
“When India articulates a stance on a global platform, the world pays attention.”¹ With these words, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Indian diaspora in New York in September 2024.² Indians share this view of their country's growing global clout.³ Among the countries surveyed for the Munich Security Index 2025, Indians are the second-most confident when it comes to their country's power trajectory (Figure 6.1). And New Delhi can back up this widespread optimism with many accomplishments. As one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, it has recently overtaken the UK, its former colonial power, as the world's fifth-largest economy in nominal GDP; it is projected to rank third by 2027. The country's huge technological potential was evidenced by a successful lunar mission in 2023, which made India the first country to land near the moon's south pole. And India's large population – it is now the world's most populous country – is a source of tremendous human capital. Moreover, New Delhi is well aware that Western states have developed “stakes” in a powerful India.⁴ They see the world's largest democracy as a counterweight to China in the geopolitically significant Indo-Pacific region and as a bridge to countries in the so-called Global South.⁵

Gaining Weight: India's Status Quest

As a result, Western states are now paying much closer attention to Indian leaders' criticism of the existing international order. In contrast to Beijing and Moscow, New Delhi is not “trying to assail the international system as it is currently constructed.”⁶ 69 percent of Indians surveyed for the Munich Security Index in July 2024 agreed that existing international rules represent the values and needs of their country.⁷ Rather than being geared at international rules and principles, New Delhi's criticism is geared at Western dominance of the international order and the way it has constrained the ambitions of India and other countries in the Global South. Outdated structures of global governance,

Figure 6.1

Respondents' views on their country's power trajectory, November 2024, scale from 1 (not powerful at all) to 10 (extremely powerful)



Data: Kekst CNC, commissioned by the Munich Security Conference. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

which do not reflect the current distribution of power in the world, are a particular point of contention. In this vein, the country's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has described the UN, where India pursues a permanent veto-wielding Security Council seat, as "a frozen 1945-invented mechanism."⁸

India's frustration with the existing order is thus inseparably linked to what Modi, after his first re-election in 2019, described as the quest "to regain the rightful position of India in the world order."⁹ This status quest is also a key reason why Indian leaders are embracing the notion of multipolarity. For New Delhi, multipolarity is "the natural state of the world," to which the world is now returning after a period of Western dominance.¹⁰

On the global stage, Indian representatives have adopted a style that proudly conveys India's claim to a place among the world's leading powers.¹¹ This has been evident in the summits New Delhi has recently hosted, among them the 2023 G20 Summit, as well as three Voice of Global South summits in 2023 and 2024. For Indians, these summits have been evidence of their country's growing convening power. Indian leaders have also used them to portray their country as "a power that seeks to unite in a divided world."¹² They have positioned India as an actor that amplifies the voice of developing countries in international

forums and acts as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South.¹³ In this regard, the inclusion of the African Union in the G20, which was achieved under India's G20 presidency, is seen as a particular success.

But India's foreign policy has not only become more self-confident; some argue it has also become more assertive.¹⁵ As suggested by reporting in *The Washington Post* about an alleged Indian assassination program in Pakistan, this includes a greater willingness to take on India's enemies abroad.¹⁶ Accusations that Indian agents were involved in the assassination of a Sikh Canadian national in British Columbia in 2023 add to this impression.¹⁷



"We are the voice of the Global South!"¹⁴

Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister, Economic Times World Leaders Forum, August 31, 2024

Weighing One's Options: India's Multi-Alignment

For India to raise its status on the global stage, Jaishankar argued in his 2020 book, the country needs "to extract as much [sic] gains from as many ties as possible."¹⁸ Multi-alignment is hardly a new approach for India. It breathes the desire for strategic autonomy that already informed New Delhi's Cold War non-alignment policy.¹⁹ Yet India now pursues it with much more vigor, as is apparent in the way the country has sought closer cooperation with Western democracies while also keeping close ties with these countries' competitors and rivals. With Washington, New Delhi has developed a close strategic partnership, especially on technology and defense.²⁰ In May 2022, both countries launched the US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies. With the EU and individual European countries, India has intensified cooperation on connectivity and supply chain resilience, as evidenced in the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the already operational EU-India Trade and Technology Council. At the same time, and despite deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, Indian leaders have continued to forge bonds with Moscow.²¹ After his 2024 re-election, Modi's first state visit led him to Russia. The prime minister's "bear hug"²² with Putin, which roughly coincided with Russian missiles striking a children's hospital in Kyiv, drew criticism from Kyiv and some Western capitals. Western governments are also disappointed at the fact that, since 2021, Indian purchases of discounted Russian oil products have grown nearly 20-fold and have thus helped fund Moscow's war effort.²³

Precisely because of its good relations with both the West and Russia, some have urged India to serve as a mediator in Russia's war against Ukraine.²⁴ Indian leaders, including Modi during his visit to Ukraine in August 2024, have indeed acted as messengers between Kyiv and Moscow. Yet observers are doubtful that New Delhi is capable and willing to assume a more proactive



“Do we have multiple options? The answer is yes. Is that a problem? Why should it be a problem? If I’m smart enough to have multiple options you should be admiring me, you shouldn’t be criticizing me.”³⁰

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar,
Indian External Affairs
Minister, Munich Security
Conference, February 17,
2024

peacemaker role.²⁵ Continued “strategic opportunism”²⁶ by India vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine is deemed more likely.

Strategic opportunism is also evident in the way India has increased cooperation with Western formats like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), while also being an active member of major non-Western platforms, among them the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS. When asked about BRICS at the Munich Security Conference 2024, Jaishankar suggested that in contrast to other members of the grouping, India perceived itself as a non-Western rather than an anti-Western state.²⁷ While New Delhi may thus help prevent BRICS from being “weaponized”²⁸ against the West, as some suggest, the grouping also serves Indian interests. Above all, it helps India raise its profile and provides it with leverage in its push for a less Western-centric order, particularly in the realms of finance and trade.²⁹

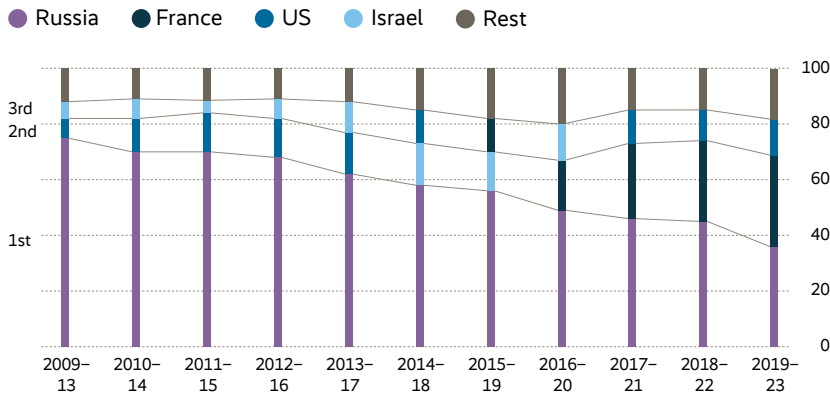
Regional Weight Loss: The China Challenge

For New Delhi, multi-alignment with both the West and Russia is also a sensible approach vis-à-vis China, which India believes poses a serious threat to its national security and global aspirations.³¹ China is the strategic glue for New Delhi’s partnership with Washington, which shares India’s apprehensions, and for cooperation within the Quad, which is aimed at counterbalancing China in the Indo-Pacific region. But Beijing is also the reason why New Delhi does not want to alienate Russia. While India has significantly increased its arms trade with Western suppliers and boosted investments in its arms production at home, between 2019 and 2023, Russia was still India’s largest weapons supplier (Figure 6.2).³² Moreover, New Delhi fears that a more internationally isolated Russia would slip “deeper into the Chinese embrace,”³³ undermining Moscow’s role as a necessary counterweight against Beijing.

To India, China poses a “direct territorial challenge.”³⁴ Although New Delhi and Beijing reached an agreement last October to disengage troops in two remaining friction points in Eastern Ladakh, a region that saw deadly clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers in 2020, a comprehensive solution to their border dispute is yet to be found.³⁵ At the same time, Beijing has been expanding its strategic footprint in what Indian leaders see as an attempt to “encircle India both economically and strategically.”³⁶ In the Indian Ocean, China has been building port facilities that India worries might be used for naval purposes.³⁷ Meanwhile, Beijing’s trade with several South Asian nations is already dwarfing India’s own trade with neighboring countries.³⁸ With the exception of Bhutan, all of India’s neighbors are now participants in China’s infrastructure and investment project, the Belt and Road Initiative.³⁹ Even

Figure 6.2

India's top three arms suppliers per five-year period, 2009–2023, share of total imports



Data: SIPRI. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

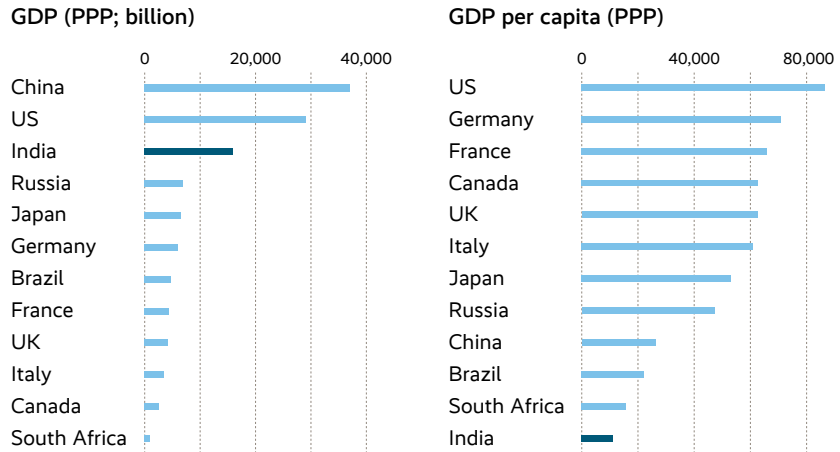
India itself has become more economically dependent on China, which became its biggest trading partner in 2023 and whose investments and technology India needs for its growth.⁴⁰ While India is “globally rising,” some have thus argued that it is “regionally declining.”⁴¹

Heavy Weight: Domestic Risks

But China is not the only challenge to India's ability to pull its weight. On the domestic side, observers point to the structural weaknesses of India's economy and the risks posed by a decline in political and cultural pluralism.⁴² After all, India faces tremendous challenges converting its impressive economic growth into good jobs for its people. At purchasing power parity, India ranks third globally in terms of total GDP.⁴³ In GDP per capita, however, it ranks 150th in the world – below the other BRICS countries (Figure 6.3).⁴⁴ Youth unemployment is at 18 percent, while the labor force participation rate for women is at just 28 percent.⁴⁵ Poverty reduction remains a serious challenge, as shown by the 2024 Global Hunger Index, which attests that India faces a “serious” level of hunger, ranking it 105th out of 127 countries examined.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the recent wedding of an Indian media mogul, estimated to have cost 600 million US dollars, has drawn attention to the fact that India remains a highly unequal country, where the richest one percent hold 40 percent of India's wealth.⁴⁷ To some observers, this was an important reason why Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost its parliamentary majority in the 2024 elections: many people felt “the economy is not delivering for ordinary people.”⁴⁸ Moreover, although New Delhi seems optimistic about

Figure 6.3

India's GDP and GDP per capita compared to G7 and BRICS countries, 2024



Data: IMF. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

Donald Trump returning to the White House – Modi was one of the first global leaders to emphatically congratulate him on his re-election – a Trump administration may well bring economic troubles for India should it decide to levy taxes on Indian exports.⁴⁹

What Modi and his BJP sell as the basis of India's growing global clout, namely their "project of nation-building" based on a Hindu nationalist ideology, also involves significant risks.⁵⁰ The project seeks to infuse the country's large Hindu majority – around 80 percent of its population – with greater pride in their culture and religion.⁵¹ The use of "Bharat," the name for India in Hindu, is part of this endeavor. To many observers, so is "stirring up resentment of the country's 200 million Muslims," which make up around 14 percent of India's population.⁵² Although there is much support for a Hindu majoritarian agenda in India – in a Pew Research Center survey, 64 percent of Indians said that being Hindu is very important to being truly Indian⁵³ – this agenda is clearly divisive.⁵⁴ It also has a "track record of prompting violence and unrest."⁵⁵ Observers have thus pointed to the risks of growing Hindu nationalism for Modi's vision for a more powerful India, which come in the form of domestic social and political instability.⁵⁶

India's impressive rise is thus not devoid of contradictions. But none of them can mask the fact that New Delhi is making strides toward achieving the recognition it believes it deserves.

Key Points

- ① Indian leaders' criticism of the existing international order and their embrace of the notion of multipolarity is inseparably linked to India's quest for a place among the world's leading powers.
- ② New Delhi has been making strides when it comes to raising India's international profile. Among other achievements, India can point to fast economic growth and a successful lunar mission. Indian leaders have also positioned New Delhi as an actor that amplifies the voice of developing countries in international forums and acts as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South.
- ③ For India, multi-alignment is the most promising approach to elevating the country's position on the global stage and dealing with the challenges posed by China. In this vein, New Delhi has both sought closer cooperation with Western democracies while also keeping close ties with these countries' competitors and rivals, Russia most of all.
- ④ As India rises globally, its influence in its neighborhood has been challenged by China's growing strategic footprint in both the Indian Ocean and among South Asian nations. Moreover, domestic challenges to India's global aspirations are found in the structural weaknesses of India's economy and the risks posed by a decline in political and cultural pluralism.

Quotations originally in British English have been adapted to American English. In some cases, stylistic adjustments were made to quotes.

Endnotes

6 India: Modi-fied Status

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