India’s Geopolitical Shift: From Sweet Spot to Age of Acquiescence

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India inhabits one of the toughest neighborhoods in the world – sandwiched between a rising China and a revanchist Pakistan, both nuclear states. Yet, a world order in transition, with China rising to challenge U.S. dominance and Russia’s attempts at slowing its decline, created for India a ‘geopolitical

sweet spot'. In the process, Russia relied on India (even if implicitly) for greater balance in continental Asia, the U.S. bet on India as an alternative to China's growing influence in Asia, and China had to modulate its assertiveness towards India, fearing that it may hasten New Delhi's lean towards the West.

Being in this sweet spot enabled New Delhi to punch above its weight and express its interests more assertively. This was seen in New Delhi's response to Western injunctions on its position on Russia's war in Ukraine. India refrained from joining in the global moral outrage against Russia, while also urging Russia to work towards ending the war. India's stoic management of the strategic rivalry with China, where it had managed to 'hold its own' and is 'no easy pushover', has added credibility to New Delhi's assertive and deft foreign policy. Similarly, India's 'polyamorous' membership in opposing multilateral groupings – from the SCO to G7 and the Quad – has been the ultimate crowning of its ability to 'play both sides'.

However, in mid-2024, there are signs of souring in the 'geopolitical sweet spot' India has enjoyed, and the future portends 'an age of acquiescence'.

Souring of India's 'geopolitical sweet spot'

Previously in a position to elicit ever-generous offers based on its growing capabilities and future promise, India is increasingly struggling to make geopolitical ends meet as it faces a more disillusioned U.S. and a less trustful Russia. At the same time, China seems to have abandoned any desire to play by India's 'geopolitical' rules and instead relied on brute military force to secure its border with India on its terms. The growing perception of India's inability to pressure Beijing to concede during border talks has raised questions about India's ability to counter China in Asia. These shifts are not dramatic, but they could accumulate over time to

become significant.

There is a growing awareness in India that Russia has decidedly put its weight behind China's rise despite all the risks. Moscow no longer appears interested in a multipolar Asia and perhaps considers a rising China a historical force that can only be refined through engagement rather than blunted through resistance. Hopes of natural contradictions between the two historical rivals and over geopolitical 'living space' in Central Asia and the Far East are no longer voiced or acted upon. In its quest against the West, China is a much more useful friend to Moscow than New Delhi. Hence, Russian favor towards India appears to be waning at great speed.

The U.S.' bet on India, catalyzed by India's decision to go nuclear in 1998, was pretty simple – as a rising democratic power with a population close to a billion, India needed to be cultivated as a responsible nuclear power and a future counterweight to China in Asia. The U.S. has been a beneficiary of such a generous calculation– when a declining Imperial Britain looked upon the U.S. as a counterweight to a rising Germany in Europe. This approach required near-perfect forbearance, as the U.S. exploited its sweet spot to extract ever more significant concessions from Britain all across the Western Hemisphere, from renegotiating the Panama Canal agreement to resolving the Venezuela crisis on American terms. However, the British bet eventually paid off in 1917 when the U.S. joined allied forces in the killing fields of Europe against the German army.

In India's case, evidence suggests that the U.S. bet has weakened over the last two years. This weakening might say as much about the U.S.' changed assessment of India's potential (and intention) as it does about American strategic innocence towards India during the more benign period of China's 'peaceful rise.' Therefore, U.S. hopes of a future India, aligned with U.S. interests in the wider Indo-Pacific region

(vis-à-vis China), is being moderated. At the same time, India's difficult position vis-à-vis China since June 2020 and subsequent assertions of India's axiomatic strategic autonomy have only further convinced influential voices within the U.S. that Washington cannot be sure that its geopolitical investments will necessarily 'pay off.'

Today's world is more fractured, war-torn, and historically 'friendlier' great powers are overextended and exhausted. Meanwhile, the not-so-friendly great power (China) is on the march as its best geopolitical days still lie ahead. In this melee, Washington and Moscow are likely to increasingly pursue negative gains vis-à-vis India. Both are less likely to exercise significant forbearance to achieve long-term strategic convergence, and more likely to exercise short-term diplomatic leverages to prevent India's drift to the other side. Such a shift may be relative and subtle but will be structurally consequential.

We can be sure that Beijing has noted such favorable developments (to itself), leading it to remain committed to its 'make no concessions' approach. As Beijing layers New Delhi's weakened geopolitical positioning with its military advantages at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the seeming contrast between India's *geographic* sour spot and its *geopolitical* sweet spot may shrink. In this context, it is vital to assess recent developments about India and the great powers briefly.



Coming age of acquiescence: Early signs

Despite statements by Indian leaders indicating a willingness to move on from the LAC standoff and repair relations with China, New Delhi facilitated the visit of a U.S. delegation that had authored a somewhat 'provocative' bill questioning China's historical right over Tibet. Meanwhile, Russia unilaterally announced a draft proposal for a sweeping logistics agreement with India. The agreement mirrors India's logistical agreements with the U.S. and appears to be aimed at testing India's fidelity and claimed strategic autonomy. Such an agreement may complicate matters as New Delhi has been

striving to reduce its defense dependency on Moscow in favor of both indigenization and greater defense cooperation with the U.S. and the West.

In this context, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's comments that there remain "areas that are affected by the continuing relationship between India and Russia, militarily and technologically" further highlight India's growing challenge in balancing its relationships.

Russian FM Sergei Lavrov's recent comments criticizing the U.S. for 'dragging' India into its 'anti-China projects' while calling for the need to revive the Russia-India-China format is also an indication of growing Russian pressure to reorient India towards the politics of the emerging Eurasian bloc. Meanwhile, China's new Ambassador to India chose to raise concerns over India's tariff and regulatory barriers to imports of Chinese electric vehicles. China has been increasingly confident in projecting bilateral ties as being 'normal' and thereby increasingly impatient about India's 'double standards' towards China regarding its trade policy. The Ambassador, unsurprisingly, failed to indicate any sign of concession towards Indian concerns at the situation at the border, even as the PLA had recently decided to deploy six J-20s just 150 km from the Sikkim-China border.

The soon-to-initiate public trials against Indian citizen Nikhil Gupta in the murder-for-hire plot in the U.S. threaten to corner and embarrass New Delhi with significant repercussions for India-U.S. relations. Such potential culpability of Indian officials in the case increases U.S. leverage over India. In recent times, India has adopted a seemingly more conciliatory and careful approach to the issue. As the two ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza intensify and potentially escalate in the coming months, the great powers will convey their expectations from India. Under stress, the great powers are unlikely to heed the better angels of their nature and are more likely to rely on their leverages. And as

great powers, all have significant, albeit different, leverages over India.