



Negotiating Emerging Multipolar World: India's Diplomatic Balancing through China's Eye

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1.0 Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of post COVID-19 international relations, four great powers—the United States, China, Russia, and India—stand as pivotal actors whose interactions shape the global political landscape. The summer of 2024 witnessed a significant diplomatic endeavour by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who visited Russia in July and Ukraine in August. These visits, set against the backdrop of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, have elicited a spectrum of responses from global commentators, with Chinese perspectives offering particularly intriguing insights. Chinese commentary on Modi's diplomatic missions reflects a nuanced understanding of India's strategic calculus and its implications for the broader geopolitical order. As China navigates its complex relationships with the United States and Russia, its analysis of India's "Yoga Diplomacy" manoeuvres provides a window into the shifting dynamics of power and influence.

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This article examines the Chinese commentary on the Prime Minister Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine, highlighting how Chinese commentators contrast the Western approach towards India and China in their dealings with Russia during the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. Next, it contends that the ongoing Ukrainian conflict has accelerated the emergence of a multipolar international order based on four great powers—US, China, Russia and India--in the post COVID-19 world.

2.0. PM Modi's Historic Visits to Russia and Ukraine Amid ongoing Conflict

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visits to Russia and Ukraine have been pivotal in shaping India's diplomatic stance amidst the ongoing conflict. In July 2024, PM Modi embarked on his first foreign trip since his third re-election in June, visiting Moscow. There is a prevailing perspective within policy circles that India's recent expansion of trade and defense relations with the United States has inadvertently driven Russia closer to China, potentially undermining India's strategic interests. It should be recalled that since the Cold War era India, China and USSR/Russia have been in a strategic triangular relationship where India derived security guarantees from the USSR against its giant northern neighbour—China. Now in the light of emerging multipolarity this strategic triangle will become more relevant for India again in the future. This deep strategic convergence between New Delhi and Moscow explains why PM Modi was noncommittal to US requests that India refrain from increasing its oil purchases from Russia to help squeeze Russia in the energy sector. India consistently abstained from voting on resolutions condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine at the United Nations and has repeatedly called for dialogue and diplomacy as the means to resolve the conflict. During the visit Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that “war is not a solution” and offered India's assistance in peace efforts.

PM Modi's initial stop was at President Putin's residence outside Moscow. During the visit, President Putin awarded Modi the Order of St. Andrew, Russia's highest civilian honor, expressing heartfelt gratitude for Modi's contributions to bilateral relations (**Figure 1**). Photographs from Moscow depict Modi warmly embracing Putin, while a widely circulated video shows Putin referring to Modi as “my dearest friend” and expressing his pleasure at meeting him.



Figure 1: Putin awarded Modi Russia’s highest civilian honor

Modi’s two-day visit to Russia, his first since 2019, coincided with the NATO summit in Washington, which marked its 75th anniversary and focused significantly on the war in Ukraine. Modi arrived in Moscow on July 8, just hours after a massive Russian bombardment in Ukraine resulted in the deaths of at least 41 people, including children at a hospital in Kyiv, sparking global outrage. The following day, Modi expressed his sorrow over the tragic loss of children’s lives. Commenting on the enduring India-Russia relationship, Rajan Menon, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at City College, stated, “It is a relationship that has stood the test of time, and there is a consensus in India, regardless of political leanings, that the relationship with Russia should be maintained and not wasted.” According to a Pew Research Center poll this year, only 16% of Indian respondents had a negative view of Russia, compared with 46% who had a positive view.

PM Modi’s visit to Russia in July was followed by a historic trip to Ukraine on August 23 (**Figure 2**). This visit marked a significant milestone in the diplomatic relations between India and Ukraine, established in 1992. Prime Minister Modi stated that the visit aimed to advance diplomatic efforts to “peacefully resolve” the issue of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Some experts viewed the visit to Kyiv as a strategic move to balance India’s diplomatic relations, particularly in light of Western sentiments, including those from the United States, regarding Modi’s earlier visit to Moscow. Prime Minister Modi’s embrace of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on July 8, 2024, coinciding with the NATO summit in Washington aimed at diplomatically isolating Russia, sparked significant reactions from the United States and its Western allies. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky openly criticized the embrace, calling it a “huge disappointment and a devastating blow to peace efforts.” Indian officials

attempted to downplay doubts about the timing of Modi's visit, asserting that the annual summit is part of a long-term strategic partnership and unrelated to the NATO summit. The US State Department expressed concerns regarding India's engagement with Russia, with spokesman Matthew Miller urging India to emphasize Ukraine's territorial integrity during Modi's talks in Moscow.

The first-ever visit to Ukraine by an Indian Prime Minister received extensive global media coverage, highlighting PM Modi's diplomatic balancing act. However, a deeper look at the visit shows that historically, a significant portion of India's defense equipment was sourced from the Soviet Union, much of it manufactured in present-day Ukraine. A key focus of the visit was the defense collaboration, particularly the supply of gas turbine engines for the Indian Navy by Ukraine's Zorya-Mashproekt. As India's naval capabilities expand, reliable propulsion systems are essential. Zorya-Mashproekt is in talks with Indian companies to co-manufacture gas turbines in India, potentially boosting local defense manufacturing and supporting the "Make in India" initiative by reducing reliance on imports.



Figure 2: PM Modi met President of Ukraine Zelenskyy in Kyiv.

3.0 The Chinese Commentary on PM Modi's Diplomatic Tightrope:

Three broad themes

The Chinese media has extensively covered Prime Minister Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine. An analysis of the Chinese commentary reveals three predominant themes regarding these visits.

Speculation on India's role as a mediator in the conflict

There are some Chinese commentators who view PM Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine through the lens of India's "Yoga Diplomacy," which they understand as New Delhi's recent approach to assert its rising global influence by bringing nations together and bridging gaps. These Chinese experts argue that Modi's visit to Ukraine embodies this "yoga diplomacy," which seeks to demonstrate the country's ability to engage with both Moscow and Kyiv, Ukraine, and alleviate concerns among several Western countries over its previous visit to Russia. However, they expressed doubt that PM Modi's move will be anything more than just a show of presence and believe it will not play a substantial role in alleviating the already escalating crisis.

Long Xingchun, a professor at the School of International Relations at Sichuan International Studies University argues that India is not yet a structural power in the international system that can shape the outcome of major international conflicts. According to him, "New Delhi lacks the strength and influence to bridge gaps between Moscow and Kiev at this moment, as its influence is very limited in Europe, not to mention the fact that room for negotiation between two sides is shrinking now due to Ukraine's offensive in Russia's Kursk region." He further added, "Does India have the strength to bring both sides to the negotiating table and offer a cease-fire proposal that satisfies both sides? This is a question,".

In other words, the essential point Professor Xingchun made was that India currently lacked the power and influence to act as an international peace broker, unlike China. It was China's significant power and influence that facilitated the mediation of a peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia last year.

Admiration for Modi's balancing act between Russia and the West

There is another set of Chinese commentators who perceive a reflection of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic approach in Prime Minister Modi's foreign policy, which they contend is concentrated on augmenting India's *Fuqiang* (Wealth and Power). They perceive Modi's foreign policy as being driven by the principle of power rather than the power of principle. Renowned foreign policy analyst Gao Zhikai praised PM Modi for his pragmatic approach to foreign policy, particularly in balancing relations with both the West and Russia following the Russo-Ukraine War in 2022." Gao identified three key aspects of Indo-Russian relations. Firstly, the strong military-to-military ties. Secondly, he noted Russia's intention to become a major energy supplier for India,

particularly in crude oil and potentially natural gas through Central Asia, which he deemed crucial for India's manufacturing sector. Thirdly, Gao highlighted India's potential to supply human resources to various sectors of the Russian economy, given Russia's declining population and the further loss of manpower due to the war with Ukraine.

Regarding Prime Minister Modi's relations with the West, particularly the United States, he argues that the US is fostering ties with India primarily for its own geopolitical interests. He illustrated this by noting that, amidst the escalating Sino-US rivalry, the US is seeking an alternative market, and India, with its large population and significant potential for economic development over the next two decades, fits this requirement well. However, he added that India-US interests will not always align and cautioned India about whether the US will treat India as an equal partner and refrain from interfering in its internal affairs. He argued that the best course of action for India is to maintain an independent foreign policy, focus on economic development, and avoid getting entangled in regional conflicts.

Another Chinese commentator noted that PM Modi maintains relationships with both Russia and Western nations, leveraging their distinct advantages. Russia contributes resources and technological expertise, whereas Western countries provide access to markets and capital investment. The commentator further suggested that PM Modi's involvement in the conflict could enhance his stature as a preeminent leader of a "leading big country" (*Lǐngxiān dàguó*). Additionally, it was pointed out that India is actively competing with China across various spheres, including diplomatic engagements. The analyst posited after Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba visited Beijing on July 26 the next day on July 27 Indian media released the news of PM Modi's visit to Ukrain. This, according to him, shows a competitive response from Modi to engage in mediation efforts in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Notably the Indian side had also seen how China played a role in facilitating a peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023.

Criticism of perceived leniency towards India

A notable aspect of the Chinese commentary on Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia is its criticism of Western double standards regarding Sino-Russian and India-Russia relations. For instance, Chinese commentators have criticized the US to have implemented various measures against China due to its perceived or actual support for

Russia in the Ukraine conflict. They also disapproved of the United States' leniency towards India regarding its continued import of Russian oil, contrasting it with the more critical stance the U.S. took towards China for similar import practices. These measures include sanctions on Chinese companies accused of supplying military technologies, such as drones and microelectronics, to Russia, and efforts to limit trade between Russia and China. Additionally, NATO allies have labeled China as a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war efforts, expressing concerns over China's role in supporting Russia.

The analysis of the Chinese commentary shows that it perceives a Western leniency in critiquing Prime Minister Modi's outreach to Russia. For instance, on social media platforms like Weibo, there is evident frustration towards Western leaders for not condemning Modi's visit to Russia and his meeting with President Putin. Many users view this as an example of Western double standards. There is a prevailing sentiment that questions why India can maintain business relationships with both Europe and Russia without significant scrutiny, while China faces substantial criticism for similar actions. One reason behind this real or perceived leniency towards India, as this author argues, is that the West utilizes a democracy versus autocracy framework when evaluating India and China.

Furthermore, there have been calls on these social media platforms for the United States and Europe to impose sanctions on Indian companies like ONGC, Indian Oil Corporation, Oil India Limited etc. that conduct business with Russia.

4.0 PM Modi's Diplomatic Balancing amid an Emerging Multipolar World

There is an emerging school of theorists in international relations that argues the post-COVID-19 era of US unipolarity, which dominated the global order since the end of the Cold War, is now a relic of the past. The 2021 report by the Founders Pledge's Carnegie-Qinghua Centre for Global Policy, entitled "Great Power Conflicts," explores the dynamics of a multipolar world with the United States, China, Russia, and India as the key players. The report defines a multipolar world as one marked by a balance of power where no single nation can unilaterally dictate global affairs. The criteria for selecting these powers included: 1. Military Power, 2. Economic Power, 3. Political Influence, and 4. Technological Advancement.

Based on these parameters, the report predicts a multipolar world in the 21st century with the United States, China, Russia, and India as the four great powers. Regarding inclusion of Russia in this league, the authors of the Founders Pledge report refer to its vast nuclear arsenal.

The stability of a multipolar world compared to unipolar or bipolar systems remains a subject of academic debate. Historical evidence shows that wars have occurred under all types of international systems. However, multipolar worlds are characterized by the potential for complex and shifting alliances. This concept was articulated by the ancient Indian political realist Chanakya in his *Mandala* theory, which posits that no single state holds hegemonic power; instead, states are relatively equal in strength and compete for supremacy. The multipolar nature of global politics before the two World Wars in the 20th century serves as empirical evidence supporting Chanakya’s *Mandala* Theory, as detailed in his treatise, the *Arthashastra*. Similarly, the 4th Century BC Chinese strategist Zhang Yi proposed a comparable theory of ‘horizontal alliances’ (*lianheng*), which facilitated the Qin state’s unification of China.

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis exemplifies this multipolar reality, which some analysts describe as a proxy war between China and the United States. While the United States is determined to maintain its primacy in the international system, the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) is working on its “China Dream” project of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (*Zhōnghuá mínzú wěidà fùxīng*) by 2049. If the United States becomes entangled again in conflicts (like War on terror), this could provide the CPC with yet another window of opportunity to achieve this long-term goal without any fear of containment.

Table 1: Great Powers Military Powers

Great Power	Mil Budget	No.of Nuclear Weeapons
US	\$ 858 billion	5244
China	\$ 296 billion	410
Russia	\$ 109 billion	4489
India	\$ 84 billion	164

Sor: SIPRI Yearbook 2023

The End of the US ‘Unipolar Moment’

For decades, the United States enjoyed unparalleled global influence, shaping international norms and policies. However, the United States’ dominant position as the

sole global superpower began to face challenges at the turn of the millennium, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. Washington’s subsequent focus on wars in Afghanistan and Iraq diverted much of its attention and resources to the Middle East and South Asia. This shift created an opportunity for other powers, notably China and Russia, to emerge as significant global players. China experienced rapid and sustained economic growth following its admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Meanwhile, Russia gradually recovered from the tumultuous 1990s under President Vladimir Putin’s political consolidation and an energy-driven economic resurgence. India’s power and status have also shown a steady rise since New Delhi conducted second round of nuclear tests in Pokharan in 1998. Some analysts argue that one of the reasons behind Bill Clinton’s visit to India was his intention to counter the Primakov Doctrine. This doctrine proposed the formation of a strategic triangular alliance among China, Russia, and India, which posed a significant security concern for the United States. The concern about the growing challenge to the US primacy got reflected in the recently released the “Nuclear Employment Guidance,” typically revised every four years, is accessible only to a select group of administration officials because of its sensitive nature. The document by the Biden administration details the US response in the event of a nuclear attack. For the first time, the revised guidance explicitly mentions deterrence strategies aimed at “China’s rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal.” The document also addresses the potential for coordinated attacks involving China and Russia (alongwith North Korea and Iran.). There are also some experts who argue that the reason the US declared China not Russia as a nuclear target in the document is due to the vulnerabilities in Russian military capabilities exposed in the ongoing conflict. Despite this, Russia remains a part of the broader strategic considerations due to its existing nuclear arsenal.

	Table 2: Assumed average annual growth rate for Great Power countries in PwC report				
	<i>2016-2020</i>	<i>2021-2030</i>	<i>2031-2040</i>	<i>2041-2050</i>	<i>Average</i>
China	8.9	5.0	3.2	3.1	4.5
U.S.	2.0	1.6	1.9	1.9	1.8
India	12.2	7.8	6.9	6.2	7.7
Russia	2.9	4.1	5.1	4.0	4.2

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict accelerates the emergence of a Multipolar World

The Ukrainian conflict exemplifies the emerging multipolar world, where power is distributed among multiple global actors rather than dominated by a single great power. The US, which was engaged in unilateral actions to change regimes in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya over the last two decades, opted not to confront Russia directly in the Ukrainian conflict. It is in and of itself perhaps the clearest illustration of how the multi-polar world order has accelerated. Additionally, the manner in which US forces withdrew from Afghanistan has led to skepticism among its allies regarding the US as a reliable security provider.

Table 3: Core Interests of the Four Great Powers

<i>Great Power</i>	<i>Core Interests</i>
US	1. Preventing Russia-China alliance 2. NATO Unity 3. Global Leadership
China	1. Reunification 2. Strategic Partnership with Russia 3. BRI 4. Benign Image
Russia	1. Prevention of NATO's Eastward Expansion 2. Regional hegemony
India	1. Strategic Autonomy/Multi-alignment 2. Energy Security 3. Global Influence

The ongoing Ukrainian conflict highlights the strategic competition between the West, Russia, and rising powers like China and India, all the four great powers have their core interests at stake in this war (see **Table 3**).

At the systemic level the conflict in Ukraine has significantly influenced global power dynamics, expediting the shift towards a multipolar international order—a transition that had commenced prior to the onset of hostilities. Russia is actively contesting the United States and its Western allies' hegemony in Ukraine. Concurrently, China and India are emerging as pivotal figures, influencing both factions of the conflict and its ramifications on the larger scheme of global governance. Consequently, we are witnessing a transformation in the structure of global power. Indeed, the renowned theorist of Neorealism Kenneth Waltz had already anticipated this transition to multipolarity. In his seminal work, 'Theory of International Politics,' Kenneth Waltz

laid the foundation for understanding the dynamics of international relations through the lens of neorealism. Waltz argued that in an anarchic international system, states are driven by the need to ensure their survival, leading them to balance against any dominant power. Following the disintegration of the USSR, the United States emerged as the sole superpower, establishing a unipolar world order known as Pax-Americana. However, Waltz predicted that this unipolarity would be temporary, as other states would rise to challenge U.S. dominance. Today, the rise of China and Russia as significant global powers aligns with Waltz's foresight, as these countries increasingly challenge U.S. hegemony.

5.0 Conclusion

There is almost a unanimous view among the international relations theorists that the 21st century is a century of multiple great powers though they differ in their number. In the context of this article four great powers— the United States, China, Russia, and India—have been identified. The ongoing Ukrainian war, some experts argue, has accelerated the emergence of a multipolar world. In this emerging world order China is encountering India as a new peer competitor across various domains, including diplomacy. Following its own notable achievements in facilitating significant diplomatic resolutions, such as the mediation of the peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023, and the successful implementation of the “Beijing Declaration” in July 2024, Chinese analysts have been closely observing Indian Prime Minister Modi's endeavors to mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine using his “Yoga Diplomacy”. These observations by Chinese commentators, however, are replete with both praise and speculation.

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