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What Colour Is the Lotus?

India Chooses Not to See a Systemic Conflict

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In United Nations votes on Russia’s war against Ukraine, the “world’s largest democracy” regularly abstains, as India continues to cultivate relations with Moscow. Appeals to morality will do nothing to change this. If the Western states want to create stronger ties with India, they must make the country concrete offers that support its economic development and increase its security vis-à-vis China.

For its G20 presidency logo, India designed a striking lotus flower on which a globe appears to be balanced. The symbol is not only a reference to the emblem of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); it is also suggestive of India’s self-image as a global player: one particular feature of the lotus plant, as an Indian diplomat in Berlin explained, is its ability to thrive and flower under adverse conditions.

On the one hand, it is certainly permissible to interpret this symbolism as Modi’s desire to ensure that the major diplomatic events led by his country help the world get back on track in turbulent times. Even more clearly, however, the design of the flower indicates how New Delhi sees itself. With Pakistan to the west and China to the north, India faces two adversaries and a multitude of other problems in South Asia – often described as the world’s least integrated region. The lotus blossom represents India’s declared ambition to emerge from this unfavourable situation to become the prosperous major power that it already ought to be, at least based on its demographics. The orientation of the globe in the logo should not be overlooked, either: just as India lies at the centre, with the South Pole pointing upwards, New Delhi is likewise using its presidency to position itself as the voice and leader of the so-called Global South.

With the fronts becoming entrenched in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and political confrontation intensifying between democratic and authoritarian systems, the West would like to be able to count on India as a solid

partner. India’s voting behaviour in the United Nations has painted a somewhat different picture, however. Despite mounting pressure from Washington, London and Berlin, instead of using resolution A/RES/ES-11/1¹ of 2 March 2022 and subsequent votes to join 141 countries in condemning Moscow’s actions, New Delhi abstained. Even though this voting behaviour has prompted widespread criticism, India is more important than ever as a partner: it has overtaken China as the world’s most populous country, has set itself extremely ambitious economic goals and will be crucial to any attempt to slow down global warming.

India is aware of its relevance in tackling global challenges. Its interests with regard to the world order differ from those of Germany and other representatives of the political West, however. While the term “systemic conflict” is becoming more and more established as a concept in Europe, with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine regarded as one of its symptoms, a sober analysis prevails in India, guided above all by one question: what nutrients does the lotus need to develop its magnificent flower, how can these best be obtained, and who is getting in the way of this endeavour?

Independent, Non-aligned and Stubborn

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has had a tradition of non-alignment in foreign policy. Even in the early days of the Cold War, it was one of the countries seeking to counteract a polarisation of the world order. In 1961, the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was

one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, which was joined by 120 countries. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the importance of the group was relativised, but it continued to be associated with the self-image of an emerging and independent “Global South”: its members refuse to be reduced to the status of pawns in conflicts between the major powers.

The Indian Armed Forces are dependent on Russian armaments.

In line with this foreign policy tradition, the concerns of the “Global South” are the central mantra of India’s G20 presidency this year too. While political and economic heavyweights such as the United States, Japan and Germany are keen to use the forum to put pressure on Russia or at least formulate a clear stance against Moscow’s war of aggression, India has a different view of its role as host. The G20 should not “allow issues that we cannot resolve together to come in the way of those we can”, Prime Minister Modi noted in an address at the Foreign Ministers’ meeting on 2 March 2023. Instead, he said, a constructive exchange was needed on challenges such as disaster resilience, financial stability, cross-border crime, and food and energy security.² Modi appealed to the group’s responsibility towards those countries in particular for which these issues are of existential importance, but which do not have the privilege of sitting at the table for the G20 meetings.

Despite the Indian prime minister’s admonition, the chief diplomats – like the finance ministers at their meeting in Bangalore earlier – were unable to agree on a final declaration because of their diverging views of the war in Ukraine. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock did make use of her intervention to call on her counterpart Sergei Lavrov to have Russian troops withdrawn from Ukraine immediately. The following day, however, the latter was given the opportunity

to present Moscow’s view of things in all its detail and absurdity at a well-attended panel discussion at the Raisina Dialogue – India’s most important security policy gathering.

India’s Stance on the Russian War of Aggression

By abstaining from the relevant UN resolutions and even offering Russia a platform in its own country, New Delhi is clearly conveying that it does not want to block its access to Moscow. There are several explanations for this. The most obvious is probably the far-reaching dependence of the Indian Armed Forces on Russian armaments. According to an analysis by Institut Montaigne, about 90 per cent of the Indian army’s equipment is produced in Russia, including a large number of T-90 and T-72 tanks and various missile systems. For the air force, the share is around 70 per cent, while the navy has the lowest level of unilateral dependence at around 40 per cent.³ Regardless of political will and given the size of the Indian Armed Forces, the amount of equipment and the maintenance involved, it would be a generational task to break or even significantly reduce this dependence.

Another explanation lies in the economic opportunities created by the West’s move away from Russia’s raw materials. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India’s import of discounted crude oil from Russia increased hugely, with the result that by the beginning of 2023 India was buying about as much as China⁴ – a massive rise, even though India recently declared its intention to comply with the price cap imposed by the EU.⁵ In the spirit of non-alignment, from India’s point of view, its own economic interests have clear priority over closing ranks with the political camp that is trying to isolate Russia by using sanctions and that regards itself as a global champion of democracy. A third factor that is occasionally brought into play by the BJP government and Indian security experts to allay criticism is the possibility of India taking on a mediating role. According to this narrative, Modi is one of the few heads of government who could possibly still exert influence on the

Russian President Vladimir Putin and would be prepared to act as a mediator if the parties to the conflict so wished.

In India, the majority view is that China is and will remain an expansionist power.

Perhaps the most important motivation for India's approach to Russia, however, is the scenario of a longer-term shift in power politics. New Delhi looks on with some concern at the deepening and publicly celebrated friendship between Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. India has maintained good relations with the Soviet Union and Russia for decades, but it has long regarded the People's Republic of China as an adversary.⁶ For India, it would be a nightmare if an alliance between the world's two major autocracies were to be consolidated north of the subcontinent.

To illustrate this, one only has to imagine an escalation between Indian and Chinese troops in a border region. What would happen if, in the event of a conflict, India had to fend off China's troops for a prolonged period of time and was in urgent need of supplies of weapons, ammunition and maintenance from Russia? Given China's dominance in the Sino-Russian relationship, China would presumably have little problem in cutting off supplies to India. There is no short-term substitute for the equipment from Russia, and as things currently stand it is not apparent that India would be willing or able to rely on any other security guarantee – such as that of Western partners. Faced with the risk of being unable to defend itself, New Delhi therefore feels compelled to at least maintain a good basis of communication with Russia, thereby loosening the ties between the autocrats again, at least in the medium to long term. If, on the other hand, India were to bet everything on an alliance with the West, this would only be a greater incentive for Beijing and Moscow to deepen their friendship.

India, China and the Rivalry of Civilisations

India and China have a long history of mutual respect. But this only ever lasted as long as the vast expanse of the Himalayas and Tibet formed an almost insurmountable natural border between them. According to Indian security experts, the effectiveness of this buffer zone has diminished considerably over the past century: for decades, India has felt its northern neighbour increasing the pressure along the border. While the West puzzled for a long time about the direction in which China would develop after its opening in the 1980s, India has for some time had a firmly entrenched majority view: it sees China as an expansionist power and does not believe this will change. India's strategic thinking simply left no room for the possibility of any kind of democratisation process happening in China. Asked about the scenario of a protracted systemic conflict, one Indian economist replied without much hesitation that it was not merely a conflict between political systems, but a rivalry of civilisations. China, he says, is a state based on completely different values and whose ideas for the future of humanity are incompatible with the way of thinking and norms that prevail in the West.

Guided by this analysis, China has increasingly become the undisputed priority of Indian foreign policy. Even the arch enemy Pakistan is increasingly becoming less of a focus, even though the conflict over Kashmir is anything but settled and harsh rhetoric against the Muslim neighbouring country prevails, especially within the BJP. Despite these simmering animosities, Pakistan no longer carries the same foreign policy weight for India as it did a few years ago. On the one hand, the country is weakened by a severe political and economic crisis and cannot risk any escalation. Secondly, the fact that Pakistan's economic weakness goes hand in hand with a particularly pronounced dependence on China ultimately leads back to the strategic priority mentioned above.

From its longstanding experience of dealing with China, New Delhi has drawn the lesson of not conducting bilateral disputes in public.





Security first: Against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian rivalry, equipping the military plays an important role for New Delhi. The central supplier of armaments is Russia. Photo: © Sudipta Das, Pacific Press, picture alliance.

“Everything we do takes place behind closed doors,” says political scientist Primit Pal Chaudhuri, a member of India’s National Security Advisory Board, summarising his government’s approach. For a constructive outcome, it is essential to keep an “emergency exit” open for Beijing, he says, adding that as soon as China saw itself trapped in a corner and this became visible to others, it would be unable to make any concessions due to its authoritarian structures. According to Chaudhuri, this would be likely to trigger a conflict. One insight closely related to this is the primacy of physical superiority that prevails in Beijing, or to put it simply: “China only understands the language of power.”⁷

This view is also upheld by the conflicts that flare up again and again along the approximately 3,500-kilometre Sino-Indian border. Driven by various territorial claims, for example in Indian-controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir and of Arunachal Pradesh, this is how China is testing India’s military strength and political resolve. Even though many conflicts are fought far removed from the public eye, Chaudhuri explains, New Delhi has long been committed to a policy of “hard reciprocity” in order to prevent China from developing an appetite for larger-scale confrontation.

New Delhi needs the Quad in order to gain a geostrategic advantage for itself.

Seeing itself as being firmly anchored in the international rules-based order, India maintains an extremely sceptical attitude towards China’s compliance with treaties. If you enter into an agreement with China, Indian experts warn, this should be understood as a snapshot of the balance of power between China and its respective partner. But if there is any shift in circumstances, they say, China should not be expected to adhere to an agreement: from Beijing’s point of view, the law of the strongest always applies in the end. Since the People’s Republic primarily

seeks to play this trump card against inferior states, counterbalancing Chinese influence in international organisations is an important component of India’s foreign policy. For this reason, delegations from New Delhi and Beijing can be found together at the negotiating tables in forums such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS group.

Given that China is the driving force in the AIIB, one might expect a defensive position on India’s part. But since India is the largest recipient of AIIB loans to date, New Delhi never tires of emphasising the bank’s multilateral character. Before the friendship between Xi and Putin took on its current form, India joined the SCO in 2017 at Russia’s suggestion, after which Beijing arranged for Pakistan to join in the same year. It is likely that this line-up will only allow for agreements at a modest level. From India’s perspective, it is a relief for the Central Asian SCO members today that they are not exclusively pressurised by Russia and China in this forum.

India’s position on BRICS is also a calculated one. The emerging economies format comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa has produced some specialised exchange forums at a working level, but it has not recently been conspicuous for initiating pioneering collaborative ventures. According to Primit Chaudhuri, however, BRICS does offer one particular advantage: for the Chinese public, the quintet has an exclusive and aspirational aura, and the prestigious summits are well received in the Chinese media. For Indian security experts, this relatively superficial rapprochement is certainly significant, because in their view, any positive perception of India in China – however limited – contributes to making Chinese aggression against India less likely.

The Quad Is Where “De-risking” Takes on Concrete Form

Forums such as these allow India to observe China’s actions and to some extent even influence jointly held discussions. The country is also

making its voice heard as a regional power and a counterweight to autocratic China. In order to gain a geostrategic advantage for itself, however, New Delhi primarily needs the Quad (Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue). After falling behind for several years, this alliance between Australia, India, Japan and the United States gathered fresh momentum on the sidelines of the 2017 summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In order to preserve its foreign policy independence and not confront China directly, India did reject US efforts to enter into a military alliance. Nevertheless, the four members agreed to work together towards a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and a “rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas”,⁸ sending out a clear signal against China’s territorial claims and its undermining of the Law of the Sea.

On the face of it, the Quad has limited scope for action. It is neither formalised by treaties nor does it have a secretariat or binding decision-making channels. On closer inspection, however, its flexible dialogue structure turns out to be more of an advantage. Since its revival, the Quad’s summit meetings involving heads of state and foreign ministers have become more frequent, demonstrating genuine shared strategic interests. The recently approved investment by the Taiwanese company Foxconn in the Indian state of Karnataka is a good illustration of this: by 2025, a new plant worth one billion US dollars is to take over a large part of iPhone production there, thus competing with China as a production site. According to Indian experts, Foxconn’s commitment to the subcontinent is not least due to the influence of the United States – coupled with agreements arrived at in the Quad.

Despite certain impressions some observers may seek to convey, the Quad is not designed to be NATO’s Indo-Pacific counterpart. There is no alliance case in which an attack on one member would trigger a collective defence mechanism. Making a commitment of this kind would be contrary to India’s fundamental geostrategic principles. But Quad members do recognise that China wants to place itself at the forefront of the world order by raising its technological capabilities to a

world-class level, thereby maximising its power projection. Based on this realisation, the Quad has set up more than 20 working groups, which can be regarded as a kind of security policy precaution, or practically applied “de-risking”. Experts from the four member states and Quad partner countries engage in dialogue in these working groups on shared approaches to all kinds of practical issues, ranging from cyber security to commodity processing and pharmaceuticals. India’s 5G strategy was also discussed in the Quad, with the result that Chinese hardware and software companies – including manufacturers such as ZTE and Huawei, as well as TikTok and around 250 other apps – are being systematically excluded from the Indian economy.

Germany has a key role to play in the negotiations on a free trade agreement.

Be More Assertive, Germany!

India’s strategic positioning vis-à-vis China provides an important framework when it comes to doing more to win over New Delhi as a partner for the West. Germany is well placed to play an active role in this endeavour. India and Germany have maintained a strategic partnership since 2000 and held their sixth bilateral government consultations last year. On his visit to India in February 2023, Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasised that the two countries shared the “foundation of democracy”, and he expressed very clearly the desire for even more far-reaching cooperation.⁹

In fact, the range of bilateral cooperation is already enormous. At the same time, however, there is a sense in all areas that the full potential has not yet been harnessed. In this connection, there is also hope that in the long term, India can be relied on to take sides with the West in its geopolitical orientation. This ambition will not be fully realised in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, Germany can make an important contribution to gradual rapprochement by focusing





on India's clearly formulated interests and on its own strengths. Here, Germany should not be guided by the idea of seeking a "values-based partnership" with India, but instead should recognise where differences will remain and where more in-depth cooperation can benefit both sides strategically.

India's ambitious growth targets and the strengthening of its defence capabilities are the main orientation here. As India's most important trading partner by far within the EU, Germany has a key role to play in the negotiations on a free trade agreement launched in the summer of 2022. After the frustration of failure on the first attempt at such an agreement ten years ago due to irreconcilable positions, neither the EU nor India have any wish to fail again, nor can they afford to do so. It is true that ideas on the details of the agreement differ widely on some important issues, as an analysis by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs shows.¹⁰ In the interest of closer ties with India, however, when weighing up concessions, it is ultimately up to influential EU member states such as Germany to also take into account the political capital that might be needed to shape the international order positively from the perspective of Europe and the West.

This does not necessarily mean going for something large-scale right away. When it comes to the meaningful expansion of Indo-German relations, Indian experts like to use the term "low-hanging fruit" to refer to projects that could actually be pursued without a great deal of effort. Professor D. Suba Chandran, Director of the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bangalore, suggests a technology partnership, for example.¹¹ India could benefit considerably from German expertise in the field of renewable energy and in the construction of

Great anger: Demonstrators protest against China in June 2020 in Bangalore. The protest was preceded by violent clashes in the Sino-Indian border region in the Himalayas between soldiers of the two countries. Photo: © Jagadeesh NV, epa, picture alliance.

batteries. Similarly, German experts could bring their expertise to bear in certain Quad working groups – on issues relating to the processing of minerals, for example, which are a key factor in breaking free from the Chinese supply of raw materials and services. Furthermore, the aspect of mobility between the two countries cannot be overestimated: prospects for work and study in Germany are a welcome element for India to promote its skilled workers, and the income flows to India thus generated play a not inconsiderable role in the Indian economy. This is why consistent implementation of the Migration and Mobility Agreement signed in December 2022 is of utmost importance – in particular the dismantling of visa hurdles.

Germany could also provide a major stimulus for deepening partnership and boosting mutual trust if it were to raise its arms policy towards India to a new level. India has long signalled interest and formulated concrete needs in this area. According to reports, Scholz and Modi also discussed a German offer of six submarines in the cost range of 5.2 billion US dollars in February.¹² In the future, treaties of this scope could help reduce India's dependence on Russia and – as an even greater incentive for New Delhi – give India the opportunity to improve its deterrence or defence capabilities vis-à-vis China. Here, too, it is important for Germany to examine and assess India's needs and expectations extremely carefully, for example with regard to manufacturing the submarines in India. Even if in some cases trade-offs would have to be made from an economic point of view, these could be offset by significant political gains.

Conclusion: India Is Going Its Own Way, but Hopefully Not Entirely Alone

Those who hope that India will make a clear stand in the systemic conflict in favour of the West will be disappointed. As in the logo of India's G20 presidency, the lotus will continue to bloom solely in orange and green. Discussions in India are not dominated by talk of a systemic conflict but by India's aspiration to revitalise itself through massive economic

growth and to assert itself internationally. Modi has his sights set on the 100th anniversary of India's independence in 2047. He is looking to use his party's policies to turn the country into a developed economy by then. India will continue to make decisions and enter into agreements based on this self-interest – whether or not these fit in with Western ideas and hopes of a global shift of power in favour of democracies.

Nevertheless, there are genuine overlaps in the geopolitical interests of India and the West. Due to the threat from China, New Delhi needs to perform a full-on balancing act that catalyses practical cooperation through forums such as the Quad while lending a sense of urgency to deeper economic relations with the EU. India does not wish to subscribe to the interpretation that a systemic conflict is being played out between autocracies and democracies, let alone entertain the notion that it could itself play a key role in this. However, it is acutely aware of the global shifts in power and seeks to play its self-appointed role as the advocate of the “Global South”. In the long run, India is striving for a multipolar order: its own demands are too high to be satisfied by simple affiliation to one side or the other in a systemic conflict that is being debated elsewhere. If Germany and its Western partners still want to ensure that India is aligned with them as closely as possible as it shapes its ambitions, they should tailor their offers as precisely as possible to India's concrete needs. Wherever possible, material concessions should be made in practical implementation with a view to building trust and generating political capital. Success stories of bilateral cooperation should also be told to greater effect. Germany in particular would do well to showcase its extensive cooperation with such an important partner country more effectively. The popularity points gained could well herald a new era in relations with the subcontinent.

– translated from German –

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