

# **Reconnecting to the West: India's New Geopolitics**

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*48th Foundation Day Lecture, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, October 28, 2021*

## Introduction

Prof. Rishikesh T Krishnan, distinguished faculty, alumni, and students of the Institute of Management, Bengaluru, it is a privilege to deliver the 48<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day Lecture of this esteemed institution. I am delighted to be here with you all this afternoon.

The subject of my lecture is about India's new geopolitics and the growing prominence of the West in the nation's international relations.

Let me begin by saying a word about the structure of the presentation.

I will start by saying a few words about geopolitics and look at the concept of the West. I will then review the changes in India's engagement with the United States. The West of course is not limited to the US; and I will follow up with an analysis of the developments in India's ties with Britain and Europe. I will conclude with a brief discussion of what it means for India's role in the world and all of us.

## The Meaning of Geopolitics

In its purest definition, geopolitics is about the role of geography in the conduct of a nation's international relations. But geography is not just about physical features like rivers and mountain ranges. The notion that geography is permanent and plays a critical role in any nation's evolution is a central theme of the school of geopolitics in international relations.

We now know that geographic features are not permanent. Rivers change course, mountains erupt, and meteors strike producing profound changes on human communities and their civilizations. We now have climate as a definitive variable – long taken as an externality and a constant. We are now struggling to cope with the dynamic interaction between us and our geography in the age of the Anthropocene.

We also know geography is not just about the physical characteristics of a place. A number of other factors – demographic, economic, technological, political and ideological dimensions – change the nature of geography.

The ancient civilizations of the subcontinent conceived India as an island – the Jambudwipa – at the centre of the universe. The massive mountain range across its northern fringes and a massive sea seemed to provide the rulers of India an immense sense of security.

That was never true. Invaders poured into the plains of Indus through millennia. Ideas – Buddhism for example – radiated out of India across the mountains and seas. India was never really an island. But there were moments when it chose to turn inward and turned its back to the external world.

The changes in ship building and the technologies to navigate high seas saw the European invasions and occupation of India via the maritime route.

More recently, Chinese engineers have shown that the Himalayas are not an impenetrable border. They have built highways across the mighty Karakoram and further down to the Arabian Sea. This is what we call the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

They built a railway line, across the permafrost of Tibet, which is inching into Nepal and will soon be at the doorstep of the Gangetic plains. This is the China-Nepal Corridor.

Beijing has also built pipeline and rail tracks from the Yunnan province of South West China into Burma and can now access the Bay of Bengal. This is the China-Burma Corridor. All these examples highlight the fact that human interventions can change geography.

Although there is much breathless coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative, this is not the first time profound changes in geography were engineered by man. Think of Suez Canal that broke through the land barrier between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, and dramatically altered the economic geography of the world. Think of the Panama Canal that linked the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

When we talk of geopolitics today, we are then talking not just about geography but about a broad range of factors that shape the politics among nations.

### What is the West?

That brings me to the second part of the title – about 'reconnecting to the West'. On the face of it, the idea of the 'West' sounds like a geographic concept. But as you all know east and west, north and south are very relative notions on a spherical object.

When we talk of the West we are of course referring to a deeply political concept. To be sure, it is not easy to define what the political west is. Once upon a time, it was easy to think of it as Caucasian and Christian.

There has been a lot of change in the ethnic composition of the dominant part of the West – US. Waves of new migration are making the Caucasians a minority in America. There are growing numbers of non-Caucasians in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia as well. See the number of Indians alone who sit among the ruling classes of these countries. A number of them, I believe, have gone through the Indian Institutes of Management. The role of religion and the dominant Christianity is declining in large parts of the West.

We all instinctively understand the West to be about capitalism. But there are other countries that are capitalist as well; many see China as capitalist too. What makes the West different from China is its democracy and political liberalism.

The West is also identified by the groups into which it organizes itself. The Group of Seven for example, brings the world's seven leading industrial democracies together. The G-7 acts as some kind of a global political directorate. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which brings the US and its European allies together, is the world's most powerful military alliance.

There is the so-called Five Eyes, a special intelligence sharing arrangement between a smaller sub-group within the West, including the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. They are also often called the Anglosphere – or a group of English-speaking countries. Together these institutions exercise great influence on world politics.

### Warming up to America

To speak about India's relations with the West seems strange. What is so special about them anyway? Today, it would seem entirely natural that India has good relations with the US. It would seem self-evident in Bangalore, a city that seems so deeply tied today to the technology hubs of the West. I am told that the largest Indian concentration of US passport holders is in Bengaluru.

The self-evident positive nature of India's relations with the US is however relatively new. It has evolved slowly through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When I was growing up in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the opposite was true. India and the US were seen as destined, if not condemned, to be on the opposite sides. It was politically sacrilegious in India to be in favor of better ties with the US. That applied more broadly to the West as a whole.

Many in the West too saw India as irreconcilably anti-Western. A leading scholar of South Asia, late Prof Stephen Cohen used to say anti-Americanism is part of the Indian DNA. This was as late as the 1980s.

Drill that down a bit; and you will find that the situation was more complicated than what it seemed. While the Indian political elite was certainly anti-American, the Indian

Street – as our foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar put it – was focused on reconnecting to the West. The Indian migration and movement across borders, whether for employment or for study, was largely to the West. These flows over the last few decades have created a substantive diaspora in the US and the West that have become increasingly influential in their host societies.

All of you, I am sure, have heard of Quad, which is so much in the news these days. It is a forum that brings India together with Australia, Japan and the United States. A few years ago, the Quad was taken for dead. But it has been revived in recent years and this year, we have had two leader-level summits.

In a surprise move, India has joined a new quadrilateral grouping with the US, Israel and the United Arab Emirates in mid-October this year. Some are seeing this as the West Asian complement to the Indo-Pacific Quad in the east.

Why is India's participation in the Quad so important? In affirming that the “Quad has come of age” at India’s first summit of the Quad, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has signalled that India is no longer reluctant to work with the US and the West in the global arena, including in the security domain.

India’s new readiness to participate in Western forums marks a decisive turn in independent India’s world view that was long defined by the idea of nonalignment and its later avatar strategic autonomy – both of which were about standing apart, if not against, the post-war Western alliances.

India had bilateral relations with the individual countries; but it was totally reluctant to join them in groups; because it did not want to be part of Western groupings in world affairs. Until now.

The Quad is not the only Western institution that India is associating itself with. Delhi is now engaging with a wider range of Western forums, even for the days ahead, including the Group of Seven.

London has invited India to participate in the the G-7 meeting this summer in Cornwall, along with Australia and South Korea. Although India has been getting invited to join the G-7 outreach meetings for a number of years, the Cornwall meeting has widely been viewed as a testing ground for the expansion of the G-7 into a D-10, or the world's ten leading democracies.

In Washington today there are multiple ideas for US-led technology coalitions that will reduce the current Western dependence on China. The working group on critical technologies and the vaccine initiative unveiled by the first Quad summit in March underline the prospects for an Indian role in trusted technology supply chains of the US and its partners. At the second summit of the Quad, the leaders agreed to set up a working group on space technologies.

India along with Japan joined a meeting of the Five Eyes in October 2020 to discuss solutions for getting law enforcement agencies, access to encrypted communications on platforms such as WhatsApp. Five Eyes is a tightly knit alliance and it is unlikely that India will be its member any time soon; but it is possible to imagine greater consultations between Five Eyes and the Indian intelligence establishment.

To be sure, India's engagement with the Western institutions is not entirely new. India joined the British-led Commonwealth in 1947, but only after India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made sure that the forum was stripped of any security role in the post-war world. It was part of India's policy of non-alignment that refused to join military alliances.

Nehru turned to the US when his policy of befriending China and supporting its sensitivities collapsed by the end of the 1950s. Facing reverses in the military conflict on the long and contested border with China in 1962, Nehru sought massive defense assistance from President John Kennedy. As Kennedy and Nehru departed soon after, the prospects for strategic cooperation between Delhi and Washington receded quickly.

The 1970s saw India drift away from the West – at three levels. It drew closer to the Soviet Union on the East-West axis and became the champion of the Third World in the North-South axis. This momentum was reinforced by the leftward turn of India's domestic politics. The 1970s also saw the India disconnect itself from the Western economies even more decisively; and India had little time for Western multinational corporations.

Let me tell you what it meant to the advanced technology sectors for India.

IBM was compelled to leave the country in the late 1970s. At Jawaharlal Nehru University, where I was studying in the 1970s, there were ambitious plans to set up a School of Computer Sciences. But the discussion, quite quaintly, was initially focused on import of computers from 'socialist Bulgaria'. That seemed far more politically correct than turning to the US.

This is to just let you know the mood of the times in the 1970s.

In the multilateral forums, India voted more often against the US at the UN than even the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The idea that India is irreconcilably opposed to the US was the dominant assessment in both Delhi and Washington. Most scholars of Indian foreign policy assumed that India will forever be alienated from the West.

But the story of India's international relations over the last three decades has been one of a slow but definitive movement towards political reconciliation with the West and

growing cooperation with the United States and its allies. The Quad summits are only a culmination of that trajectory.

It was the reform of the Indian economy at the end of the Cold War, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which created the basis for the renewal of ties between India and the US.

If expanding commercial ties began to provide a new stabilizing depth to the bilateral relationship in the 1990s, Washington's activism on Kashmir and its eagerness to denuclearize India made matters difficult for Delhi.

Coupled with the domestic turbulence and the era of weak coalition governments, Delhi embarked on a hedging strategy by joining the Russian initiative for a strategic triangle with Moscow and Beijing that eventually evolved into the BRICS forum along with Brazil and South Africa.

President George W. Bush, however, decisively changed US policy towards India in the 2000s, by discarding Washington's mediating impulse on Kashmir, de-hyphenating its engagement with Delhi and Islamabad, and resolving the dispute over non-proliferation. Bush recognized that India is critical for the construction of a stable balance of power in Asia that was being transformed by the rapid rise of China.

Just when Washington was ready to transform the relations with India, Delhi was paralyzed by self-doubt. If Atal Bihari Vajpayee was bold in calling India and the United States "natural allies" in 1998, his successor struggled to realize that objective. Manmohan Singh could not overcome the strong political and bureaucratic resistance to advancing India's relations with the US.

His national security team began to reinvent non-alignment, keep distance from the US. Even as problems with China multiplied after 2008, the Singh government continued to be hesitant in strengthening ties with the US.

Modi, who became Prime Minister in 2014, began to reverse Delhi's resistance to deeper partnership with the US. His affirmation to the US Congress – in the summer of 2016 – that India's "historic hesitations" in engaging the US are over, was not just rhetorical.

Modi wrapped up the residual issues relating to the historic India-US civil nuclear initiative, renewed the 2005 agreement for defense cooperation, signed the so-called foundational defense agreements that have facilitated interoperability between the two armed forces, widened the annual bilateral Malabar exercises (to include Japan in 2015 and Australia in 2020), revived the Quad in 2017, embraced the Indo-Pacific construct in 2018, and joined the two Quad summits in 2021.

Two factors have facilitated this.

For one, PM Modi carried little of the anti-Western ideological baggage of the nativists who thrive in his own party and the political left or the centrist Congress that chose to keep a safe distance from the US. Modi's judgement that India needs a more productive relationship with the US and West is rooted in the simple calculus of national interest and self-assurance, rather than any involved reasoning.

For another, much credit must go to successive US Presidents – Bill Clinton in his second term, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump – even as a hesitant Delhi battled the anti-Western demons in its mind. If you are looking for a positive instance of 'strategic patience' – this is probably it. President Joe Biden appears determined to build on this legacy.

While both Delhi and Washington deny that the Quad is a military alliance, it could certainly take India closer than ever before to a security coalition with the West. Although India did sign onto an alliance-like pact with the Soviet Union in 1971, it pulled back abruptly, soon after the liberation of Bangladesh.

If India shunned alliances in general, it was even more reluctant to be part of the Western ones; but the idea of Indian participation in looser coalitions of various kinds with different Western countries is no longer taboo in Delhi.

### Beyond the US: Britain and Europe

Beyond the relationship with the US, Modi revived India's strategic interest in the British-led Commonwealth, strengthened ties with the European Union, joined the European 'Alliance for Multilateralism', sought to make India part of the solution to the mitigation of climate change, initiated the International Solar Alliance and the Indo-Pacific Maritime Partnership with France, and unveiled a new strategic partnership with Britain. Each of the moves listed above was against the instincts of the Indian political class, Delhi's permanent bureaucratic establishment, and the foreign policy community.

While improving relations with the United States gained traction quickly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, moving forward with Britain and Europe was a lot harder. Although Britain and Europe have had a longer and more intimate relationship with India, the problem lay in the colonial past of Britain and Europe. India was a colony of Britain and the bitter legacies of the independence struggle continued to cloud Delhi's engagement with London. Meanwhile, Europe remained an uncharted territory for the Indian elite, despite the occasional turn to Britain's European rivals in the quest for Indian independence.

In recent years, Delhi has been eager to overcome those difficulties and put a new emphasis on engaging with Britain and Europe. Delhi is now strengthening security cooperation with Britain and Europe within the framework of Indo-Pacific geography

amidst the new challenges from China. Delhi is also seeking free trade agreements with London and Brussels. The new interest in deepening commercial ties with Britain and Europe comes amidst India's efforts to decouple its economy from China's.

India's attitude towards Europe has evolved since the end of the Cold War as it opened up its economy to European capital and technology, sought to revitalize political engagement with the world's major economies and diversify its security partnerships.

As Delhi turned its gaze on Europe, the first to seize the new possibilities was France. Like Washington, Paris was ready to pursue an 'India First' policy in South Asia and tilt towards India in its regional disputes with Pakistan. France, like the United States, was also quick to see the benefits of the Indo-Pacific framework in broadening political and security cooperation with India.

Moreover, both Washington and Paris shared Delhi's understanding of the threat from China in general terms, if not in specific detail. London and Brussels, initially reluctant to see the China challenge, are now closer to the US perceptions. They had also articulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies and are willing to take a fresh look at India in the altered international context.

Delhi, under Modi, has been more open to shedding its hesitations about engaging London and Brussels and investing political and bureaucratic resources in reshaping the relationships with both. Although the US and its Asian allies remain critical for India in balancing China, Delhi now sees the importance of Europe in providing greater depth to India's great power calculus.

In the words of Minister Jaishankar, India now seeks to: "engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play." This is probably the first time that India's political leadership has included Europe (and UK) as part of its geopolitical calculus.

It is one thing for Modi and his advisers to recognize the virtues of strategic ties with UK and Europe, but another to convince its political and bureaucratic establishment to move forward. In Delhi, lingering resentment against Britain, the former colonial power, never really disappeared. Its leaders were quick to disparage Britain as a 'third rate power'. London's 'even-handed' policy towards India and Pakistan, London's formulations on the Kashmir dispute, and its tendency to poke into India's internal developments inevitably sparked off political bashing of Britain.

In the past couple of years, Delhi has talked up the strategic importance of Britain for domestic audiences, underlining its global salience as an economic, technological, political, and security actor. Delhi also realized that the Conservative party was a lot less interested than the Labour party in messing with India's domestic politics, and more



open to practical deal-making with India, including on the controversial question of Indian migration.

Intense negotiations in the last couple of years have now produced a road map for transforming bilateral relations by 2030, which was unveiled at the Modi-Johnson virtual meeting in early 2021. The road map included commitments for more intensive cooperation in defense and security, trade and investment, climate change, as well as science, technology, education and innovation. The two sides also signed an agreement on migration and mobility that allowed more legal movement of Indian professionals into UK and Delhi taking back illegal Indian migrants in Britain.

Delhi is no longer obsessed with raging against the colonial past or complaining about the perceived British connection to Pakistan and hostility in Kashmir. Instead, it is determined to expand the weight of its own strategic engagement with London, leverage enduring British strengths for India's national development, take advantage of the post-Brexit British ambitions for a global role, and find practical ways to manage the messy dynamic between the domestic politics of both countries shaped by a large Indian diaspora in Britain.

If too much intimacy was Delhi's problem with London, the lack of it was a problem with Brussels. For far too long Delhi had viewed Europe either through the eyes of London, or Moscow. In the last few years, Delhi had ended the political neglect of Europe as a collective and pressed for a more strategic engagement. In the last couple of years, Brussels has also taken a more active interest in India by unveiling an India strategy in 2019.

At the end of a rare virtual summit, with the participation of all the EU leaders in the dialogue with PM Modi, the two sides unveiled an ambitious framework for wide-ranging cooperation including on trade, connectivity, resilient global supply chains, climate change, and digital transformation.

Although the evolving British and European perceptions on China, the Indo-Pacific, and India's potential contribution to regional and global order provided a new basis for India's partnership with UK and the European Union, Delhi recognized that trade was the weak link in the engagement with London and Brussels that so value commercial partnerships.

Having walked away from the Asia-wide free trade agreement (the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) in 2019, Delhi has been eager to forge trade ties with the West. It has now agreed to intensify negotiations with Britain for a Free Trade Agreement and persuaded the EU to resume the long-stalled negotiations on trade liberalization. This has necessarily involved Modi getting India's recalcitrant trade bureaucracy to think strategically about commerce with Britain and the European Union.

In the past, Delhi's quest for a multipolar world was about cooperation with Russia and China to limit the dangers of America's unipolar moment. As it confronts Chinese dominance of the East today, India needs both US and Europe to construct a multipolar Asia. With the American partnership on a strong footing, Delhi is now adding British and European complements to it.

### India as a Great Power

One of the enduring concerns in the Indian foreign policy discourse has been the fear that drawing close to the US and the West will undermine India's independent foreign policy and strategic autonomy. That fear might have been true in the early years of independence. But today India is the third largest economy in PPP terms. Its nominal GDP today has already overtaken that of France, is level with Britain and could overtake Germany's by the end of this decade. Delhi then will be the fourth largest economy behind China, US, and Japan.

India is also the third largest spender on defense and has one of world's largest armed forces. Together with the large size of its market, India is today in a position to negotiate relations with other major powers on reasonable terms. As it sheds the small-nation syndrome and imagines itself as part of the great power constellation shaping the world, India's foreign policy must inevitably be different from that of a new nation in the middle of the 20th century.

India's relationship with the US will be very different from those of its allies like Europe and Japan, which desperately needed American support after the debilitating effects of the Second World War. India today can and will be a partner for the US and the West on its own terms. It is that self-confidence that is driving India to solidify the strategic partnership with the West.

For many of my generation, the West was about escaping the lack of opportunities in India. At home many saw it as 'brain drain'. Today the movement of professionals is seen as 'brain gain' and as a powerful boost to the modernization of India.

As the interface between India and the West grows by leaps and bounds across a broad range of areas, the current generation has an unprecedented opportunity to become a two-way bridge between the two worlds.

Building that bridge will be intellectually satisfying, professionally rewarding and financially appealing. I am sure many of your students will be on that bridge transforming the societies at both ends and building a powerful strategic partnership between India and the West.

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Professor Mohan is one of India's leading commentators on India's foreign policy. He has been associated with a number of think tanks in New Delhi, including the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, the Centre for Policy Research and the Observer Research Foundation. He was also the founding director of Carnegie India, New Delhi – the sixth international centre of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC. He was the Henry Alfred Kissinger Chair in International Affairs at the United States Library of Congress, Washington DC, from 2009 to 2010. He served on India's National Security Advisory Board. He led the Indian Chapter of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs from 1999 to 2006.

He writes a regular column for *The Indian Express* and was earlier the Strategic Affairs Editor for *The Hindu* newspaper, Chennai. He is on the editorial boards of a number of Indian and international journals on world politics.

Professor Mohan has a Master's degree in Nuclear Physics and a PhD in International Relations. Among his recent books are: *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (2013) and *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (2015).