As India rises and aspires to great-power status, does its foreign policy need an overhaul?

This has been a frequently debated topic among Indian strategic thinkers since the February 2012 release of Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century, a policy paper by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) in New Delhi, an independent, nonpartisan research institution and think tank. Nonalignment 2.0 advocates crafting a strategic path for India without entirely rejecting the previously accepted path of “nonalignment,” which bespeaks the “strategic autonomy” the country has enjoyed over the years. The focus of the document is the Asian theater and India’s two most urgent security concerns—China and Pakistan—as well as India’s move toward multilateralism and its approach to international institutions.

Nonalignment 2.0 comes within the context of India emerging as a major power in global politics and the United States acknowledging the country to be a “priority” in its regional and global designs. The paper notes that India’s current approach to constructing an international order is based on two essentials: partaking in the regional and global institutions and likely involvement with a group of countries (p. 31). Much of global multilateral politics is linked with current Asian politics, and most powers like the United States and China place emphasis on the regional facets. Compared to others, New Delhi has been cautiously guarded in its foreign policy approaches. This seems appropriate, since India first needs to become an Asian power and prioritize its regional thrust before striving for a great-power posture in the global arena. This is accented by a renewed U.S. focus on the Asia-Pacific and the regional reactions to China’s vigorous maritime drive in Asian politics. In addition, Asian regional multilateral bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are on the ascendant.

The major paradox for Indian foreign policy is how to approach and balance policy toward the two most important countries of the world: the United States and China. While the United States is strategically closer to India at many levels, China remains a security

JAGANNATH PANDA is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi. He can be reached at <jppjagannath@gmail.com>.
These developments need to be contextualized within upwardly mobile India-U.S. relations, without complicating the relationship with China and other countries like Russia. *Nonalignment 2.0* discusses India’s policy partnerships in a global context (p. 31), with exclusive discussion of the United States. The paper notes the “relative decline of the American alliance system,” which may be because the nature of multipolarity has made the U.S. alliance system more subtle. The United States’ recent posture in Asia-Pacific indicates that its influence is still vibrant, particularly compared to China, and although China has emerged as an economic giant, the United States is still a politically powerful nation. India is a vital power in the United States’ Asia-Pacific strategy and must take a decisive position on a strategy to meet both China and the United States, particularly in the context of Asia and also at the global level.

While managing foreign relations needs a careful and well-planned strategy, India’s rise has compelled it to take seriously multilateral forums and politics and implement an evolving and sustained approach toward international institutions. An important focus of India’s current foreign policy is pursuing an open approach toward multilateral institutions, the prime target being permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Emphasis has also been given to other global bodies like G-20, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. Given the multipolar nature of the current world structure, India’s openness to several levels of power relations and multilateral institutional politics and engagement is certainly a progressive step. However, there must be an objective reordering of India’s approach of adhering to various multilateral organizations and bodies. India’s approach could be constructed at three different levels: subregional or regional, cross-regional, and global.

At the subregional or regional level, multilateral organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the SCO, ASEAN, and SAARC need robust attention. These organizations are linked to various dynamics of Asian politics, and most of them shape China-India politics because China’s strong economic and political contacts within most of these organizations compel India to pursue a dynamic profile.
Cross-continental groupings like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) are important for India’s global rise and profile. Through these bodies, India tries to advocate its “developing country” label. These groups are vital to India’s dialogue on climate change and reforming global financial bodies and institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and WTO. The objective should be preparing a constructive and vigilant path for engagement with this variety of multilateral institutions, without seriously complicating the foreign policy posture.

On the whole, there has been a noticeable departure in India’s posture and approach to nonalignment in recent decades. New Delhi has moved away from the so-called neutral world to the world of power politics based on merits and priorities that benefit India’s objectives in foreign policy and heighten its global image. However, these priorities need to be reassessed and put in order at a time when issues like Afghanistan, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, energy politics, and regional organizations like ASEAN and the SCO are the key contours of politics in Asia today.

Arguably, India’s aspiration to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has prompted many to see and value India as a serious power (p. 34). Obtaining a permanent seat would require intense diplomatic endeavors. It might be more appropriate, however, that without becoming overambitious, India continues to be part and parcel of a multipolar, democratized, and rational world order and continues to become a leading developing countries, even if it brings about subtle changes in its current foreign policy approach. While pursuing intense multilateralism is a perspective that requires closer systematic attention, much will depend on how India decides to construct and approach its closer Asian periphery and the power politics at the regional level. The asymmetry inherent in Asian power politics means that India’s approach to ASEAN, the SCO, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and Afghanistan needs vigor. That means, India not only should pursue an intense policy toward sensitive issues in regional politics but must carry forward a decisive approach toward multilateral bodies corresponding to those issues at the regional level. Establishing strong bilateral relations as well as engaging multilaterally with the Asian region must be a priority strategy. In short, while India would prefer a liberal, vis-à-vis stable order in Asia, central to India’s rise, one based on massive engagement and a stable and secured maritime region in Asia should be the main priority.

While intense multilateralism does require closer attention, much will depend on how India decides to see its closer periphery, mainly the power politics in Asia and its different subregions. India’s approach to subregional bodies, mainly ASEAN and the SCO, has been the defining feature of its foreign policy stratagem. Two current imperatives define India’s approach toward Asia: stabilizing the region through contributing to security multilateralism dialogues and maximizing economic and commercial contacts through regional trade and economic dealings. The key notions and beliefs through which India characterizes its regional identity are the constructs of “Asian power” and the “developing economy.” The “Asian power” dialogue has helped India associate with powers like Japan, while the “developing economy” dialogue helps it share the desk with adversarial powers like China. Any shift from this policy posture may affect India’s bearings at the regional level. This policy directive invites greater insight into the subregional or geographic politics. Bodies like the SCO, ASEAN, and SAARC have been the cornerstones of Asian politics for a long time, and India needs to attach great importance to these regional groupings. What enhances these regional bodies’ relevance in today’s context is the dynamism of geography and resource politics.

Further, India must seriously note that Asian regional politics and bodies are on the verge of transition. While the SCO is on the verge of expanding both its membership and mandate, China is becoming serious about SAARC and is asking for membership in this South Asian body. Despite India’s new “look east” policy, China has more diligently reached into the Southeast Asian region, dominated ASEAN both economically and politically, and maintained a decisive posture in the South China Sea. India must take serious note of this and prioritize its foreign policy not only toward individual powers but also the subregional bodies and their respective subregions.
Asia’s various regional facets and politics should be the first priority in India’s current and future foreign policy approaches. That calls for some reordering of priorities. The South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and Afghanistan are indeed vital regions for India and require robust attention. But hedging in various subregional and regional multilateral settings will still decide most Asian politics. *The geo-politics of the current century is more than a zero-sum game.* Power rivalry and competing cooperation are the two most important aspects of Asian politics today. It would be best for India to aim for pan-Asian leadership at the regional level without conceding much of an option to others, at least not to a power like China. Doing so will be a valuable revision of, and addition to, India’s age-old nonaligned principles without needless compromise. ✮