

Managing Multiple Multipolarities:

Evolving interstate relations in the
Asia-Pacific

Manpreet Sethi, Fang Liu, Elaine Natalie

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Manpreet Sethi is Acting Director and Senior Research Adviser at APLN and a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi, where she leads the project on nuclear security. She is an expert on a range of nuclear issues, having published over 120 papers in academic journals of repute. Over the last 25 years she has been researching and writing on subjects related to nuclear energy, strategy, non-proliferation, disarmament, arms and export controls, and BMD. Her current focus areas include nuclear security instruments (UNSCR 1540, summits, treaties and laws, PSI, CSI, etc) and nuclear governance (regimes and architecture).



Fang Liu is a Policy Fellow at APLN and a graduate of Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies with a Master's degree in Global Affairs and Policy. She received her first Master's degree in Transcultural Studies from Heidelberg University and her Bachelor's degree in German Language and Literature from Sun Yat-sen University. Her research interests include Chinese politics and foreign policy, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and East Asian history.



Elaine Natalie was a Policy Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) and a graduate of Seoul National University's Graduate School of International Studies with a Master's degree in International Cooperation. She received her Bachelor's degree from Yonsei University's Underwood International College, where she majored in International Studies and minored in Political Science and International Relations. Born and raised in Indonesia, Elaine is fluent in English and Indonesian. Her research interests include the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation treaties and regimes, and the intersection of existential threats in the Asia-Pacific region.



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Please direct inquiries to:

Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
APLN Secretariat
4th floor, 116, Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul, ROK, 03035
Tel. +82-2-2135-2170
Fax. +82-70-4015-0708
Email. apln@apln.network

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Executive Summary

The international system will be neither unipolar nor bipolar in the foreseeable future. Nowhere is this fact truer than in the Asia-Pacific. While the United States would, of course, remain central to world affairs given its military, economic, and technological preponderance, it is unlikely to have the same desire or the capacity to be the singular pole with the strongest footprint in every regional theatre. The vacuum created by a relatively reduced American role is likely to be filled by China to some extent. It certainly has the ambition and the financial capability to step up its game. Through mostly economic bilateral and multilateral arrangements, China is increasing its presence across the world, and the subregions of the Asia-Pacific in particular. Meanwhile, several other regional countries are also rising to prominence, making the contemporary international order *multipolar*.

Every pole or contender to that position, however, visualises different benefits of multipolarity. This report is an attempt at understanding the multiple views of multipolarity in three important players in the Asia-Pacific – China, India, and Indonesia. These three countries have been chosen for their demographic, geographical, economic, military, and political clout, as well as their potential to exert major influence on the region and the global order.

While the United States sees it as a way of unburdening itself of its financial commitments to the security of European and Asian allies, China sees it as an opportunity to position itself (together with Russia) as “stabilizing forces in a complex and turbulent world”¹ stabilizing forces in a complex and turbulent world,” to enhance its global standing and counterbalance US containment. In fact, by framing multipolarity in language of interdependence, autonomy and mutual respect, China seeks to create solidarity with the countries of the Global South, who support multipolarity because they want to ensure that no single superpower dominates the international discourse and their interests are not marginalised by the more powerful. India envisages multipolarity as a condition that can allow nations to operate in multiple contexts and multiple spaces. It offers them freedom of choice and a flexibility in the pursuit of their multi-faceted

¹ “Wang Yi Meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 20, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202502/t20250222_11560491.html

interests which was not available in the binary world of the Cold War era. Such a conceptualisation of multipolarity emanates from India's own experience and search for strategic autonomy in a polarised world. As an individual player in Southeast Asia, and as a major member of ASEAN, Indonesia perceives itself as a country that can play a significant role in a multipolar world, even if it is not in itself a pole. Since its independence the country has shown a sharp streak to steer clear of falling into the lure of joining any bloc. Rather, it has aimed at maintaining its freedom of action and maximizing gains. A multipolar world, therefore, is seen as beneficial to reinforce its role as a bridge builder and thereby contribute to its own power and influence.

Divided into three sections, the report first explores multipolarity as sketched out by each country, explains why and how each of them is pursuing it, and how they believe it furthers their national interest. The second section then compares the three perspectives and highlights the challenges that competing visions of multipolarity pose. The final section evaluates the value of multipolarity for the United States and China and provides recommendations for their policymaking.

In this situation of multiple multipolarities, one vision of multipolarity cannot be expected to prevail. Inter-state relations are likely to operate like shifting sands based on convergence or divergence of interests. Consequently, states' decisions will defy simple explanatory frameworks that seek to cast them as in a state of alignment with one power or another. A myriad of interests and priorities between states and within states will compete, clash, and produce unexpected constellations of cooperation and conflict. It is up to the would-be poles and bridge-builders of this emerging order to ensure more of the former, and less of the latter.



Managing Multiple Multipolarities: Evolving interstate relations in the Asia-Pacific

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Introduction

The international system will be neither unipolar nor bipolar in the foreseeable future. Nowhere is this fact truer than in the Asia-Pacific. While the United States would, of course, remain central to world affairs given its military, economic, and technological preponderance, it is unlikely to have the same desire or the capacity to be the singular pole with the strongest footprint in every regional theatre. The diminishment of US influence is especially likely in the near term under President Trump, who has not shied away from putting “America First” and has urged others to build their own capabilities to manage their own security concerns.

The vacuum created by a relatively reduced American role is likely to be filled by China to some extent. It certainly has the ambition and the financial capability to step up its game. Through mostly economic bilateral and multilateral arrangements, China is increasing its presence across the world, and the subregions of the Asia-Pacific in particular. It is the largest trading partner of over 120 countries across the world.² Almost half or about 48.2 percent of China’s exports by value go to Asian countries, prominently, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, India and Indonesia.

As it stands in 2025, the United States and China are the world’s largest and second-largest economies, respectively. The United States accounts for approximately 26.11 percent of the global economy, while China holds about 16.76 percent. Despite their presence as major powers, they do not, however, constitute exclusive blocs, as was the case between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Rather, the United States and China are heavily economically interdependent. They also have independent but simultaneous footprints on the same countries in several regions.

² Lee Ying Shan, “China de-linking talk is overdone and it’s still key to the global economy, Asian Development Bank says”, CNBC, 25 Feb 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/26/china-still-top-trading-partner-for-many-countries-says-adb.html>

Meanwhile, several other regional countries are also rising to prominence, making the contemporary international order multipolar. As the Indian Prime Minister Modi said in 2024: “the world is inexorably moving towards real multipolarity.”³ Of course, the multiple poles – individual nations or a group of them – are not equal in economic size, military strength, or diplomatic weight. In fact, the United States and China far outmatch them on all fronts. However, these poles are significant in their own ways, creating what may be described as an asymmetrical multipolarity “with two or three big powers and several middle powers all jockeying for position.”⁴

In the Asia-Pacific, many regional states and actors see multipolarity as both inevitable and desirable. While there is a recognition that the United States and China are significant poles, there is also a conscious effort to build and utilise other nations and organisations as poles too. So it is that besides nations, groupings such as ASEAN, G20, SCO, BRICS, QUAD, and several other minilaterals are becoming important players in their own right and for their value as providing space for manoeuvre on divergent or convergent interests.

Going by US and Chinese official statements, they seem to support the rise of a multipolar world order. In January 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping (along with Russian President Putin) expressed support for a “more just multipolar global order.”⁵ More recently, the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, too acknowledged that “multipolarity is not only the norm, but a preference in the eyes of the Trump administration.”⁶ However, the dividends of multipolarity that Beijing and Washington hope to reap are quite disparate. While the United States sees it as a way of unburdening itself of its financial commitments to the security of European and Asian allies, China sees it as an opportunity to position itself (together with Russia) as “stabilizing forces in a complex and turbulent world,”⁷ to enhance its global standing and counterbalance US containment.

Besides the difference in US and Chinese views, the countries of the Asia-Pacific too conceptualise multipolarity and its benefits quite differently: India’s vision of

3 Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi’s remarks at the extended format Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States, July 4, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37926/Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modis_remarks_at_the_extended_format_Meeting_of_the_SCO_Council_of_Heads_of_States

4 Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, “Yes the World is Multipolar”, *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/>

5 “Day After Donald Trump oath event, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin demand ‘just, multipolar world’ *Hindustan Times*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/day-after-donald-trump-oath-event-xi-jinping-and-vladimir-putin-demand-just-multipolar-world-101737464740188.html>

6 “Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show”, US Department of State, January 30, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>

7 “Wang Yi Meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 20, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202502/t20250222_11560491.html

multipolarity is distinct, or even opposed to China's vision of multipolarity, which are both distinct from ASEAN's vision of multipolarity, and so on. Likewise, even US allies that prefer a more multipolar region think about the role of their country in a multipolar Asia-Pacific in different ways.

Understanding multiple multiplicities

This report is an attempt at understanding the multiple views of multipolarity in three important players in the Asia-Pacific – China, India, and Indonesia. These three countries have been chosen for their demographic, geographical, economic, military, and political clout, as well as their potential to exert major influence on the region and the global order.

Divided into three sections, the report first explores multipolarity as sketched out by each country, explains why and how each of them is pursuing it, and how they believe it furthers their national interest. The second section then compares the three perspectives and highlights the challenges that competing visions of multipolarity pose. The final section evaluates the value of multipolarity for the United States and China and provides recommendations for their policymaking.



Leaders of the BRICS+ nations in Kazan, Russia, 24 October 2024 (Wikimedia Commons)

Before proceeding, it would be pertinent to dwell a bit on the issue of terminology. Some analysts have described the situation of multiple, imbalanced, powers as a “multiplex.” Amitav Acharya, a scholar and author, for instance, characterises a multiplex world as one in which there would be no single global hegemon, but many consequential actors who would co-exist and wield influence despite their power inequalities. He conceives such a world as comprising of actors that are not only great nation states, but also several smaller ones, as also international and regional bodies, corporations, social movements, people themselves and even non-state actors (e.g. criminal networks) who would have the ability to challenge state sovereignty and stability. The multiplex shows broad patterns of interdependence of trade, investment flows, production networks, supply chains, and common ecological and other transnational challenges.

While the idea of a multiplex has its logic and appeal, this report will use the term multipolarity for two reasons. One, the term has wider acceptance and usage in academic literature and official statements; and secondly, the report’s unit of analysis is the nation state or groupings of nation states that can reasonably be described as a “pole” because they have the economic and technological capacity, the geographical and demographic scale, and the ability to project influence, undertake agenda setting and provide aid in crises. Non-state actors are yet to possess such comprehensive capabilities.

It should also be made clear that multipolarity is not the same as multilateralism. The latter is a concept that envisages platforms of many individual nations in pursuit of a common objective. So, from the most inclusive United Nations to the more exclusive NATO, SCO, ASEAN or Quad, all are big and small multilateral organisations. Some of the smaller unidimensional ones have also come to be known as minilaterals. All of these might have the ability to wield influence on particular issues and become a pole, thus contributing to multipolarity.

Sometimes, a multipolar world is also referred to as pluralistic. Pluralism captures the idea of the presence of many players reflecting a diversity of power and influence. While a multipolar world would certainly be pluralistic, multipolarity, on the other hand, is premised on the presence of some nations or groups as having the power to become a pole or to coalesce or lead others on specific issues.

Lastly, it also needs to be said that a multipolar world need not be a polarised or divided world. Several poles could also work in harmony. But for this to happen, the geopolitics around the poles will need to be consciously steered away from zero-sum thinking.

Understanding multiple multipolarities – China, India and Indonesia

Different states have different understandings of multipolarity, and what it means for them. This section discusses the distinct Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian understandings of multipolarity.

China's multipolarity – Keeping China at the centre

In March 2024, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi described his country's "principled position on global governance" as one that enabled "an equal and orderly multipolar world" in which there could be "equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal rules for every nation. Certain or a few powers should not monopolize international affairs ... It must be ensured that all countries, regardless of their size and strength, are able to take part in decision-making, enjoy their rights, and play their role as equals in the process toward a multipolar world."⁸ He further explained the meaning of 'orderly' as a multipolar world where all nations "observe the purposes and principles of the UN. Charter, and uphold the universally recognized basic norms governing international relations." Going by this definition, China's multipolarity does not mean multiple blocs, or a messy jockeying for power. Rather, it is envisaged as structured relationships where all countries act within a UN-centred system as equals.

Taken at face value, such a definition of the multipolar world sounds attractive. Interestingly, it also stands in contrast with how the current US administration has used the concept, which deemphasizes the existing international order.⁹ US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that "the US can finally prioritize its national interests rather than focusing on upholding the US-led "liberal world order."¹⁰ In such a world, he said, "The Chinese will do what's in the best interests of China ... and the United States needs to do what's in the best interest of the United States." Analysts have interpreted Rubio's words as "an abdication of the U.S.' previously self-assumed responsibility for the rest of the world."¹¹ It is worth noting,

8 "Wang Yi Elaborates on an Equal and Orderly Multipolar World and a Universally Beneficial and Inclusive Economic Globalization", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 7, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256418.html

9 This report does not go into the details of the US relationship with multipolarity. Previous work in this project series has covered this topic as it pertains to Southeast Asia, see: Piper Campbell, "The United States: An Increasingly Incidental Provider of Regional Stability in the Asia-Pacific?" (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 20 June 2024), <https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-dialogue-on-china-us-relations/the-united-states-an-increasingly-incidental-provider-of-regional-stability-in-the-asia-pacific-us-and-southeast-asian-responses>.

10 "Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show", US Department of State, January 30, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>

11 Mallie Prytherch, "Marco Rubio's Multipolar World", China-US Focus, February 7, 2025, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/marco-rubios-multipolar-world>

however, that the US approach to multipolarity depends greatly on whether a Democratic or a Republican administration is in power.

China appears to see the current White House vision of multipolarity as an opportunity. Speaking at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised that the Chinese vision of multipolarity is a world free from US hegemony and imperialism, and one that prioritises interdependence, autonomy and mutual respect.¹² By framing multipolarity in this way, China differentiates itself from the United States, to create solidarity with the countries of the Global South, who support multipolarity because they want to ensure that no single superpower dominates the international discourse and their interests are not marginalised by the more powerful.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi speaks at the Munich Security Conference in 2017 (Wikimedia Commons)

¹² “A Steadfast Constructive Force in a Changing World”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 15, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202502/t20250215_11555665.html

Chinese emphasis on equality of all states irrespective of their size obviously holds appeal. Towards this end, China has actively called for amplifying alternative voices from the Global South at BRICS, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and in the G20. It has also sought to enhance cooperation with Southeast Asian countries via initiatives like the China-ASEAN Summit, China-ASEAN Dialogue, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). China has also aimed for strategic relations with some Pacific Island countries, exemplified by its comprehensive strategic partnership with the Cook Islands,¹³ or its security agreement with Solomon Islands.¹⁴

China claims that its approach to the Global South is rooted in its own experience of having benefited from the existing world order. It recounts how it gained access to global markets and economic growth through its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). China believes that it seeks to ensure that the international system is built in a way that better serves the interests of developing countries. As Wang Yi underscored in a speech, China aims to be a “factor of certainty” in the multipolar system and will strive to be “a steadfast constructive force in a changing world.”¹⁵ Chinese officials repeatedly state that China does not aspire to compete for hegemony or seek sphere of influence, nor does it intend to overtake or displace the United States.

However, such pronouncements of China’s vision of multipolarity are viewed with scepticism and even suspicion for at least two reasons. Firstly, despite China’s protestation that it does not intend to replace the United States as the dominant power in the region, a weakening US influence in the Asia-Pacific would nonetheless be in China’s interest, and facilitate its strategic objectives such as reunification with Taiwan or maintaining preponderance in the South China Sea. China has not refrained from making use of its advocacy of multipolarity as a de facto displacement strategy. Its efforts at building cooperative mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific, primarily driven by economic interests, have implicit security considerations, particularly aimed at balancing US influence in the Asia-Pacific. Its overtures to Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar to build ports are not perceived in these countries to have only benign intentions.

13 “Action Plan 2025 -2030 for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Cook Islands and the People’s Republic of China”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Government of the Cook Islands, n.d., https://mfai.gov.ck/sites/default/files/2025-02/2025-2030%20-%20Action%20Plan%20for%20Strategic%20Partnership_0.pdf

14 Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, December 2, 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/12/02/china-solomon-islands-security-agreement-and-competition-for-influence-in-oceania/>

15 “A Steadfast Constructive Force in a Changing World”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 15, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202502/t20250215_11555665.html; “Act together for a more stable future of the China-U.S. relationship — Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Xie Feng at the 15th US-China CEO and Former Senior Officials’ Dialogue”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, December 17, 2024, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202412/t20241221_11512954.htm

Secondly, China's active economic engagement through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments in infrastructure and trade projects have produced mixed results for the recipient countries. While most have benefitted from infrastructure development that has facilitated interconnectivity for building relationships and networks, it has not led to transformative economic change in participating countries. Many, in fact, have faced mounting debt distress because of Chinese loans and are suffering economic dependencies that are being seen as leading to a territorial assault or having to succumb to agreement that bind states to Beijing's long-term strategic objectives.

One of these strategic objectives is to influence the recipient nations' policies towards Taiwan. As a recent report by *The Economist* indicates, 70 countries now officially endorse China's sovereignty over Taiwan. Since 2016, ten countries have chosen to cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of China, often in exchange for economic investment.¹⁶ In FOCAC 2024, African leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to the One China policy, recognized Taiwan as "an inalienable part of China's territory", and supported "all efforts by the Chinese government to achieve national reunification" in the final declaration.¹⁷

So, China's aim to provide economic growth and development opportunities to developing countries as part of its vision of multipolarity has also been effectively used to advance a second set of interests and shape global discourse to consolidate support for its ideological stance on critical issues. As put by analysts, "Beneficiaries are expected to support China's position on sensitive issues, with the endorsement of the One-China policy an unnegotiable condition."¹⁸ Pakistan supports China's position on Xinjiang and the South China Sea; Myanmar and Cambodia's economic dependencies have meant a deference to Beijing's core interests, serving as a counterbalance to US influence in the region. Cambodia has, for instance, defended China in the ASEAN and shielded criticisms of its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

Overall, China's economic strength is a major tool that is well employed to build an alternate vision of the global order and shape discourse in its favour. Its inclination towards hierarchical relations tends to belie the emphasis on equality in its rhetorical statements. So, while China is already a pole given its material, military, technological, political and diplomatic power, its commitment to fostering a

16 Including Panama, São Tomé and Príncipe, The Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Nauru.

17 "Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building an All-Weather China-Africa Community with a Shared Future for the New Era", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 5, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240905_11485993.html

18 For more on this, see Beverly Loke and Xiaoli Guo, "China's coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific: strategies of connectivity and association", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, February 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2471351>

multipolar order is viewed with suspicion, certainly by other contenders who also aspire to become poles. India is one of them.

India's multipolarity – Retaining and strengthening strategic autonomy

India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, describes multipolarity as the presence of “many more independent centres of decision-making in the world”¹⁹ which allows countries to find their own convergences and overlaps. This then can lead to the creation of plurilateralism. In his Asia Society speech in New York in September 2025, he described plurilateralism as a world “where countries form combinations based on convergences and overlaps ... phenomenon of groups of countries coming together for often a limited agenda, sometimes in an agreed theatre to pursue their interests ...”²⁰

As can be discerned from Jaishankar's statement, India envisages multipolarity as a condition that can allow nations to operate in multiple contexts and multiple spaces. It offers them freedom of choice and a flexibility in the pursuit of their multi-faceted interests which was not available in the binary world of the Cold War era. Such a conceptualisation of multipolarity emanates from India's own experience and search for strategic autonomy in a polarised world.



External Affairs Minister of India S. Jaishankar speaks with Kyung-wha Kang, President and CEO of the Asia Society in New Delhi, 25 September 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs).

¹⁹ “Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at Asia Society Policy Institute in New York”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 25, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38341/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_Asia_Society_Policy_Institute_in_New_York

²⁰ *ibid.*

articulating its will to exercise independent thought and action on issues of national interest. In the difficult decades after independence in 1947, when the global order was perceived to be inimical to India's interests on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity, on availability of economic aid, on imposition of technology denials, it was the idea of strategic autonomy that was nurtured to ensure space and influence in the international system. This was exemplified in the idea of non-alignment during the Cold War, and multi-alignment since then.

India has long articulated that its interests would best be served in a world where no one nation is able to dictate terms and in the case of Asia, it certainly is unwilling to accept China as the only pole. India has resisted China's control over Asian governance through its own outreach to the developing world through the G20, and other India driven initiatives such as Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR, a maritime cooperation initiative in the Indian Ocean), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping. India has also used China-dominated forums, such as the expanding Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS+ to prevent China from coalescing a section of the non-Western world to further its own idea of multipolarity with 'Chinese characteristics.'

Today, some in India claim that the country is a pole in its own right given that it has acquired significant attributes of comprehensive national power over the past seven decades. Its material growth coupled with a significant science and technology base as evident in its largely indigenous nuclear and space programmes, a defence production base, especially in missiles and other high technologies and new digital infrastructure give it a new heft in the global order. On norm and rule-building too, India is an increasingly influential actor. New Delhi seeks to engage emerging partners diplomatically and economically to deepen cooperation, promote development, combat terrorism, push for reforms in global governance, and advance climate negotiations. India has also prioritized connectivity and economic integration through initiatives such as the India-Africa Forum Summit, the International Solar Alliance, and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. These efforts underscore its ambition to foster stronger linkages and bolster its role as a champion for developing nations.

However, India finds its own emergence as a pole in the Asia-Pacific being countered by an assertive China. One evidence of this is seen in China's implicit opposition to reforms of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. This opposition is perceived by India as a means of imposing a disproportionate representation of the region with China projecting itself as the lone Asian representative. The Indian call for reforms of the UNSC emanate from a need to reflect the new global reality of multipolarity beyond the present five members. As stated by one former naval veteran and now strategic analyst Anil Chopra, "any outcome in which China becomes the preponderant power in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, without tangible and well-knitted opposition, cannot be good for a rising

India in the long term, nor commiserate with its sheer size, population, potential, values and civilisation.”²¹

More recently, India is also becoming more wary of a concerted strategy by China to curb India’s rise by engineering proxy wars with Pakistan. Such entanglement at the South Asian level is perceived as an attempt to constrain India, and derail its economic growth by casting a shadow on India as a stable and safe investment destination. Given the move by several Western nations to redesign supply chains to reduce dependence on China and move manufacturing hubs to India and other Asian countries, the hyphenation of Indian security with Pakistan serves China’s efforts to stymie India’s rise and thereby ensure a unipolar Asia. From arming Pakistan with modern weaponry (including the fighter jets that were involved in the recent crisis in May 2025) to constructing strategic highways through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which runs through territory that India claims as its own, Beijing has tied Islamabad into a dependency that combines economic leverage with military patronage. And this proxy then comes in handy to promote its strategic interests.

As articulated by one analyst, “India sits at the centre of this storm ... On one side is the ideological and military axis of China, Pakistan, and Turkey. On the other is the financial and diplomatic machinery of Washington and Brussels. Together, these powers are seeking to deny India the status of an independent pole in a multipolar world.”²²

Given that the United States, Russia, and China are seen to be central to its foreign policy, India finds that a multipolar world would best suit its national interests so that it can balance its relations with each. So, it prefers a level of US engagement with the region as a counter-weight to China, but it has also consciously cultivated relations with others too to prepare for a contingency where the United States could turn more insular, be distracted by domestic or other issues in different theatres, or if it were to arrive at a “G2” understanding with Beijing. New Delhi does recognise the value of the United States till it can build its comprehensive national powers to become an influential independent pole in broader Asia.

However, while recognising the importance of the United States in its pursuit of multipolarity, India has also been protective of its national interests when in conflict with US positions such as on maritime, cyber and space issues. For India then multipolarity is “more than merely a dilution of US unipolarity.

21 Anil Chopra, “India and Multipolarity in Asia” (Delhi Policy Group, February 19, 2022), https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/india-and-multipolarity-in-asia-3752.pdf

22 Navroop Singh, “Dollar Vs Dharma: India’s Stand in a Multi-polar Global Order”, *The New Indian*, May 21, 2025, <https://www.newindian.in/dollar-vs-dharma-indias-stand-in-a-multi-polar-global-order/>

It is multidimensional, as the diffusion of power is not uniform or unidirectional, and leads to reordering of older hierarchies.”²³ In this vein, while India finds the US-led Quad and I2U2²⁴ useful for some purposes, it is also keen to leverage the growing influence of Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and others through forums such as BRICS, SCO, RIC and the G20. A range of such organisations with varying objectives, memberships, weights and influence enhance India’s ability to pursue its interests consistent with its needs and capabilities, and ensure strategic autonomy to reduce dependencies on big powers. This approach has not been uncontroversial in India and has been a particularly sensitive issue for some Indian diplomats who have been concerned that some sections of the strategic community define the “China threat” through a US prism, leading to an ‘Americanisation of India’s China policy’.²⁵

In order to avoid Americanisation and yet derive the maximum benefits of its comprehensive partnership with the United States while minimising the costs of standing up to it on issues on which there are conflicting interests, the exercise of strategic autonomy creates the greatest leverage for India to safeguard its interests in a multipolar world. It is not surprising, therefore, that Prime Minister Modi has emphasised that “As Vishwa Bandhu, or the friend of the world, India will always strive to deepen cooperation with all its partners.”²⁶ India’s approach to multipolarity has many similarities, but also key differences, with that of another emerging Asian giant, Indonesia.

Indonesia’s multipolarity – leveraging its role as a bridge builder

Like India, Indonesia has long been averse to bloc politics, maintaining a foreign policy of non-alignment through its “free and active” (bebas aktif) doctrine, which has been in place since the country’s independence in 1945. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia defines one of the nation’s goals as “contributing to upholding a world order founded on independence, lasting peace, and social justice.” This principle became more firmly established during the Cold War, when Indonesia, like most other countries, found itself caught between the United States and the Soviet Union and pressured to choose a side. As early as in 1948, the country’s Vice President, Mohammad Hatta, had emphasised in the Parliament that the country should not be merely an object in international political struggles but must remain a sovereign actor with the right to determine its own position.²⁷

23 Venkatesh Varma, “Unpacking Multi-Polarity: India’s Strategic Autonomy in an Uncertain World,” *NatStrat*, February 25, 2023, <https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/unpacking-multi-polarity-india-s-strategic-autonomy-in-an-uncertain-world-7.html>

24 See: <https://www.state.gov/i2u2>

25 Venkatesh Varma, “Unpacking Multi-Polarity: India’s Strategic Autonomy in an Uncertain World”.

26 “PM Modi’s Remarks at the Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States,” Prime Minister’s Office, July 4, 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2030802>

27 Oleh Inggara Parandaru, “The Free and Active Policy: The Beginning of Indonesian Foreign Policy (Politik Bebas Aktif: Awal Politik Luar Negeri Indonesia),” *Kompaspedia*, March 14, 2022, <https://kompaspedia.kompas.id/baca/infografik/kronologi/politik-bebas-aktif-awal-politik-luar-negeri-indonesia-bagian-satu>

Non-alignment was seen to give Indonesia this space and it became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), hosting and co-organising the 1955 Bandung Conference alongside leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The conference, attended primarily by newly independent Asian and African states, aimed to promote independence, sovereignty, and the interests of nations who did not wish to align with either superpower.

Non-alignment gave such states the right to be free and active. But, as Indonesia explained in its Law of the Republic of Indonesia on Foreign Relations in 1999, being “free and active” did not mean being neutral. It meant being “free to determine its stance and policies on international issues without being bound *a priori* to any global power.” Accordingly, Indonesia has not shied away from contributing to conflict resolution, or taking position on global issues to achieve order, independence, lasting peace, and social justice. This principle has continued to guide Indonesia’s foreign policy and its support for an increasingly multipolar world.



Then-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Marty Natalegawa with participants of the Participants of Bandung Spirit Program with Pacific Countries 2011 on Disaster Relief, 21 March 2011 (Wikimedia Commons, Ismail Fahmi).

In the 21st century, Indonesia carefully manages its relationships in the emerging multipolar world. While Indonesia does not consider itself a pole, it still aspires to be a consequential player in the region, by balancing ties with major powers. It engages with China for the country's "resource development, economic partnership, and infrastructure development,"²⁸ but this "pragmatic engagement" is not equated with "submitting to it."²⁹ Rather, Indonesia balances engagement with China by looking to the United States for "technology, counter terrorism, and regional stability."³⁰

In addition to balancing its relations with major powers, Indonesia has emphasised the growing role of developing countries and has repeatedly expressed its ambition to empower the Global South, both individually and through ASEAN, to advance shared interests. It positions itself as a "bridge builder" between developing and developed nations,³¹ or a "quintessential pivot country."³² It is the largest nation in Southeast Asia in terms of population, economy, and geography. As the world's fourth most populous country, its population accounts for 41 percent of ASEAN's total, while its GDP makes up nearly 40 percent of the bloc's overall economy. Although ASEAN's chairmanship rotates annually among its member states, Indonesia has historically assumed a de facto leadership role in the region.³³

Some critics argue that Indonesia has struggled to effectively lead ASEAN or strengthen its solidarity and centrality, particularly in addressing regional issues such as the military coup in Myanmar during its 2023 chairmanship. Others, however, note that despite significant challenges at the time – including the war in Ukraine, the lingering economic impacts of COVID-19, and contradictions within ASEAN, such as its non-interference principle – Indonesia made progress in affirming ASEAN centrality during its 2023 chairmanship and demonstrated leadership on the global stage by steering the G20 the year before.

28 Sampe Purba, "Global Power, Multipolarity and the New Administration", *Indonesia Business Post*, July 22, 2024, <https://indonesiabusinesspost.com/what-if/global-power-multipolarity-and-the-new-administration/>

29 Stanislav Vladimirov Mladenov and Mohamad Fikri Sulthan, "Multipolar International System and the Place of Indonesia: Prospects and Opportunities", *Journal of Advance in Social Sciences and Policy*, 3, no. 1 (May 2023): 23.

30 Purba, "Global Power, Multipolarity and the New Administration".

31 "Expressing Desire to Join BRICS, Indonesia Emphasizes Support for Advancing Developing Countries' Interests" (Sampaikan Keinginan Bergabung Dengan BRICS, Indonesia Tegaskan Dukungan Untuk Memajukan Kepentingan Negara Berkembang), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, October 24, 2024, <https://kemlu.go.id/berita/sampaikan-keinginan-bergabung-dengan-brics-indonesia-tegaskan-dukkungan-untuk-memajukan-kepentingan-negara-berkembang?type=publication>

32 Mladenov and Sulthan, 25.

33 Raditio Klaus Heinrich, "Indonesia Must Reclaim Its ASEAN Leadership," *The Interpreter*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-must-reclaim-its-asean-leadership>

Individually and as part of ASEAN, Indonesia strongly emphasises the importance of upholding multilateralism in the emerging multipolar world to ensure peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the region.³⁴ It advocates active participation in global multilateral forums such as the UN and G20 to represent the interests of developing nations and promote a more inclusive and just international order. Most recently, Indonesia officially joined BRICS on January 6, 2025, becoming the first Southeast Asian country to do so. Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Sugiono, stated that "Indonesia's joining of BRICS is a manifestation of our free and active foreign policy. It does not mean we are aligning with a particular bloc, but rather that we are actively participating in all forums."³⁵ Interestingly, its membership of BRICS has been balanced by also initiating its accession process to the OECD. And amidst this omnidirectional outreach, Sugiono has reiterated that, despite its increased engagement with these two groups, Indonesia will remain committed to its non-aligned principle and avoid participation in formal military alliances.³⁶ Rather, Indonesia's foreign policy under former Defence Minister and retired army general President Prabowo is likely to be more inclined towards building independent national defence capabilities as compared to his predecessor Jokowi, who focused more on domestic and economic development.³⁷ Prabowo has stated on multiple occasions that national defence and security should be Indonesia's top priority.³⁸ This defence-centric posture is reflected in Prabowo's plans to increase Indonesia's defence spending and modernize its military capabilities – especially naval and aerial –³⁹ including strengthening bilateral defence ties with other middle powers, such as India, Japan, and Turkey.⁴⁰

Indonesia's free and active foreign policy also extends to its foreign economic relations, which "prioritises economic growth over geopolitical alignment." However, this prioritization does not mean that Indonesia is immune to economic coercion by major powers or the impacts of global geopolitical crises. To build

34 "Asean Leaders' Declaration on Asean as an Epicentrum of Growth" (ASEAN, 2023), 1, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ALD-Epicentrum-of-Growth-merged.pdf>

35 "Expressing Desire to Join BRICS, Indonesia Emphasizes Support for Advancing Developing Countries' Interests".

36 "OECD Not at Odds with BRICS, Says Indonesian FM," *Antara News*, December 2, 2024, sec. Indonesia, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/336661/oecd-not-at-odds-with-brics-says-indonesian-fm>

37 Jefferson Ng, "How Prabowo Will Likely Manage Indonesia's Defence and Foreign Policy," *The Strategist*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-prabowo-will-likely-manage-indonesias-defence-and-foreign-policy/>

38 Dani Prabowo and Fika Nurul Ulya, "Prabowo: What's the point of building high-speed trains and roads if this country is not safe?" (Prabowo: Untuk Apa Bangun Kereta Cepat dan Jalan kalau Negara Ini Tidak Aman?), *Kompas*, July 13, 2024, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/07/13/09570891/prabowo-untuk-apa-bangun-kereta-cepat-dan-jalan-kalau-negara-ini-tidak-aman>

39 Jefferson Ng, "How Prabowo Will Likely Manage Indonesia's Defence and Foreign Policy"

40 Prabowo and Turkish President Erdogan agreed on a series of defense industry cooperation agreements during Erdogan's visit to Indonesia on February 12, 2025, see: "Prabowo, Turkey's Erdogan Agree to Bolster Ties," *The Jakarta Post*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2025/02/12/prabowo-turkeys-erdogan-agree-to-bolster-ties.html>

economic resilience against such external shocks, Indonesia must diversify its trade and investment sources and expand not only its bilateral defence ties with other middle powers but also its economic partnerships. Strengthening regional cooperation within ASEAN and the broader Asia-Pacific is also essential to ensure collective resilience in times of crisis. Domestically, Indonesia must make inroads in capacity building—particularly in key sectors such as food production and energy – to reduce its dependencies. Only through such efforts can Indonesia genuinely uphold a truly free and active foreign policy, one that avoids both overdependence and autarky.

As an individual player in Southeast Asia, and as a major member of ASEAN, Indonesia perceives itself as a country that can play a significant role in a multipolar world, even if it is not in itself a pole. Since its independence the country has shown a sharp streak to steer clear of falling into the lure of joining any bloc. Rather, it has aimed at maintaining its freedom of action and maximizing gains. A multipolar world, therefore, is seen as beneficial to reinforce its role as a bridge builder and thereby contribute to its own power and influence.

Comparing contending multipolarities: Challenges and Opportunities

As is evident from the brief overview of how the three Asian powers conceive multipolarity and how they seek to leverage it for their national interest, there are multiple multipolarities. China claims that its concept of multipolarity is inclusive seeking the good of all, compared to that of the United States, which is looking at a multipolar world as a way to advance America First. India rejects China's version of a multipolar world that stresses antagonism with the West, and believes that it propagates a neo-imperialistic ambition. India's preference is to keep both the United States and China in check through a global redistribution of power with multiple poles ranging from Russia to minilaterals of all kinds. It also seeks reform of the UN Security Council, a goal that it has long advocated to make space for itself. Indonesia is seeking to carve out its own place as an individual player with leverage while also firmly remaining within ASEAN as a collective force for regional security, less a pole, but a positional player in the regional multipolar order. Given its demographic weight, growing economic and military potential, as well as its political presence – as was evident in the hosting of the G20 Summit in Bali – Indonesia believes that its role and voice in a multipolar order will become increasingly important.

In the case of each, multipolarity is a tool for widening their choices in different domains and minimising reliance on any one pole. For each country multipolarity allows convergence of interests in diverse settings. This convergence allows for a certain flexibility of relationships and even enables playing off one for the other to maximise one's gains.

But will these variances in vision of the multipolar order result in diplomatic or military clashes? At the diplomatic level, it is certainly evident that states are jostling for space to market their own idea of multipolarity. For instance, in 2022, Beijing leveraged its BRICS presidency to use the annual leadership summit to foster consensus on expanding the group's membership to six new member states, spanning three continents. This expansion was seen as a success of China's efforts to bolster its global influence but would also have diluted the influence of India in the grouping. Meanwhile, during India's presidency of the G20, New Delhi similarly brought in the African Union, a grouping of 55 countries that added to its stature and diluted the influence of other major poles in that grouping. India also scored another diplomatic victory when it launched the "Voice of the Global South" Summits in 2023 – "a forum conspicuously excluding China"⁴¹ – to emphasise the need for greater emerging-country influence in reshaping the

41 Paolo Magri, "Introduction", in *Competing for the Global South: Asia and the Quest for Leadership in a Multipolar World*, ed. Filippo Fasulo and Nicola Missaglia, First edition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, 2024), 9.

international order. The Global South is indeed a ground for both China and India to exercise and combat each other's influence. Meanwhile, Indonesia's pursuit of influence in the Global South is less about shaping the composition of international groupings, and more aimed at ensuring that – once states of the Global South are included – the collective agenda serves their own interests, not those of more powerful countries, whether China, India, the United States or any other grouping.

The competition between China and India for their visions of multipolarity is not surprising, given that it is the first time that two nearly equally large and populous countries, who also suffer from territorial disputes and are armed with nuclear weapons, are simultaneously rising in the same neighbourhood. Both follow different economic models and political ideologies and are presenting themselves as two alternatives. India is seeking to counterbalance Beijing's assertiveness and its expansive BRI with its own model of outreach. It seeks to become a counterweight to China in Western institutions such as the Quad, but it also countervails the West through membership of groupings like BRICS and SCO. By spanning both sides, India positions itself as a bridge to advanced economies, something that China has not been able to do given its more adversarial relations with the US and its allies. However, India's efforts at bridge-building are perhaps less effective than those of Indonesia, which does not have any antagonistic relationships or stated aspirations to become a pole of its own and it can therefore position itself as an honest diplomatic broker.



The Himalayas on the border between India and China, seen from India's Assam Province (Wikimedia Commons).

In this situation of multiple multipolarities, one vision of multipolarity cannot be expected to prevail. Inter-state relations are likely to operate like shifting sands based on convergence or divergence of interests. As opined by some scholars, "Countries will pursue multi-aligned strategies, selecting partners based on their

specific interests and creating a complex web of shifting alliances rather than a unified bloc with a coherent vision for global affairs.”⁴²

In fact, minilaterals or groupings of a small number of nations on convergent issues have found it easier to emerge and assume significance in this setting. Given their ability to offer public goods ranging from food security, humanitarian and disaster relief, transport connectivity, maritime security, health infrastructure, people-to-people exchanges, climate, and clean energy, minilaterals have been described as “agile, flexible, and less institutionalised arrangements and, where current security multilateralism is absent, can prove effective without being bound to more rigid treaty-based alliances.”⁴³ For this reason, minilaterals are not necessarily effective tools of one major power to constrain the influence of another (even if a major power seeks to use it that way). For example, US-India cooperation through the Quad has clear limits in terms of the support that the United States can expect from India in a Taiwan contingency.

Due to decreasing faith in multilateral institutions, nations of the Asia-Pacific are likely to draw greater comfort from participation in minilaterals to advance their interests. Such groupings will emerge with diverse partners that can narrowly align themselves on an issue despite rivalry, competition or differences with others. It is also worth noting that many minilaterals are emerging that include none of the major powers, and Indonesia is involved in a number of such initiatives, including the trilateral maritime security initiative INDOMALPHI, between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines,⁴⁴ and the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area initiative.⁴⁵ Indonesia, in keeping with its bridge-building ambition (but also to check West Papuan independence ambitions), joined the Melanesian Spearhead Group, composed of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, as an associate member in 2015.⁴⁶ While minilaterals are unlikely to become poles that rival the comprehensive influence of states, they may come to exercise the influence of poles within specific functional areas, although there is no clear example of this happening at present.

42 Filippo Fasulo, Nicola Missaglia, “The Rise of the Global South and the India-China Power Struggle”, in Filippo Fasulo, Nicola Missaglia ed. *Competing For The Global South: Asia and the Quest for Leadership in a Multipolar World* (Milan: ISPI, Nov 2024), 24; see also: Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, “India’s Voice for the Global South: Strategies in a Multipolar World,” in *Competing for the Global South: Asia and the Quest for Leadership in a Multipolar World*, ed. Filippo Fasulo and Nicola Missaglia, First edition, 2024.

43 C Raja Mohan, “The Nimble New Minilaterals”, *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/minilateral-alliances-geopolitics-quad-aukus-i2u2-coalitions-multilateralism-india-japan-us-china/>

44 Kenneth Yeo Yaoren, Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass, and Jasmininder Singh, “Maritime Malice in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines: The Asymmetric Maritime Threat at the Tri-Border Area” (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31913>

45 See: <https://bimp-eaga.asia/>

46 Liam Fox, “Indonesia Admitted to Melanesian Intergovernmental Group,” *ABC News*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-25/indonesia-admitted-to-melanesian-intergovernmental-group/6573968>

Finally, could contending multipolarities lead to military clashes? It is unlikely that the difference in views of multipolarity in itself will be a source of conflict, but different approaches to multipolarity may exacerbate territorial or ideological differences, which could then lead to conflict. For instance, the disputed line of actual control between China and India could again become contested, as the two states seek to manoeuvre against the other for influence.

However, there could also be benefits to a multipolar world, because cooperation between states on any one issue is less likely to lead to correlate with support in some other domain. Since neither side in a conflict could be sure to rely on the allegiance of nations, as would have been in the case of allies or bloc in a bipolar world, they might be constrained from expanding the conflict. Uncertainty over support from other poles, might restrain aggressive behaviour.

Recommendations

Given the inevitability of multipolarity in Asia-Pacific, the two major powers, China and the United States, should refrain from attempts at building blocs of nations in competition with one another. Not only are such efforts increasing the risk of conflict in the region, but they are ultimately doomed to fail, as states seek to diversify their partnerships and shun exclusive alignment.

The major powers should also not let their visions of multipolarity become sources of contention. Rather, both major powers should allow the region's other actors – despite a significant differential in comprehensive national power – to build their own set of issue-based relations in constellations that both include and exclude major powers.

A multipolar order does enhance the power of individual states, but it also constrains it. China and India must seize on the opportunity created by their détente in early 2025 and strengthen efforts to understand the rationale, purpose and modalities of the other's vision of multipolarity. So as not to inflate mutual threat perceptions, China would do well to recognise that there is a limit to the extent that India wants to “Americanise” its foreign policy. Likewise, the Indian security community should also recognise that there is a limit to the extent that China can translate economic influence into diplomatic and political leverage, even with close partners like Pakistan.⁴⁷

To align with its stated multipolar vision that emphasises the equality of all states, China should reduce aggressive posturing in territorial disputes with smaller states in the region. It has been fifteen years a Chinese top diplomat said that “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact” at a regional security summit, but the comment still reminds regional states that China's vision of multipolarity may come with an implicit suggestion of hierarchy and acquiescence. Chinese policymakers would do well to listen to those Chinese scholars who argue that China needs to improve its strategic communication.⁴⁸

Finally, decisionmakers must keep their eyes on the horizon, as the multipolar order will continue to shift and regional power dynamics with it. As China has grown more powerful, it has gradually asserted itself within the international order

47 In the words a former Indian diplomat, China has not managed to build “equities” in South Asia, see: Manpreet Sethi, Joel Petersson Ivre, and Frank O'Donnell, “Regional End-States and Beyond: Asia-Pacific Views on the China-US Relationship and Regional Stability” (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, September 2024), 32, <https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-dialogue-on-china-us-relations/regional-end-states-and-beyond-asia-pacific-views-on-the-china-us-relationship-and-regional-stability>

48 See: Shao Yuqun, “China as a Provider of Regional Stability in the Asia-Pacific: Balancing Security and Development” (Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, March 2025), 21, <https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-dialogue-on-china-us-relations/china-as-a-provider-of-regional-stability-in-the-asia-pacific-balancing-security-and-development>

and positioned itself as an influential player within it; India has historically pursued strategic autonomy to assert itself against the same international order which it has viewed as fundamentally unfair, but has now increasingly followed China's example in demanding more influence, or actively pursuing it. Today, Indonesia appears to be far from following in China and India's footsteps, but as a major leader in ASEAN – projected to be the world's fourth largest economy already by 2030 – it may very well elect to pursue its interests in a more assertive manner than bridge-building.

In a world of multiple multipolarities, states' decisions will defy simple explanatory frameworks that seek to cast them as in a state of alignment with one power or another. A myriad of interests and priorities between states and within states will compete, clash, and produce unexpected constellations of cooperation and conflict. It is up to the would-be poles and bridge-builders of this emerging order to ensure more of the former, and less of the latter.

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