India and the Art of Strategic Balance

Alexander Stubb, the Finnish president, in his book *The Triangle of Power* argues that the interplay between the Global West, the Global East and the Global South will shape the world to come. What he had not foreseen at the time when he wrote the book was the rapid unravelling of the Global West into two different entities: the United States and the rest of the historical West driven by their own security challenges and political goals. Exactly this – the unravelling of the collective West, the ensuing rupture, a falling out – was in full display at the recently concluded edition of the Raisina Dialogue. The framing of this year's convening, *Saṁskāra*, Sanskrit for a civilisational tool, a statement of continuity that allows societies to assert their truth, accommodate their contradictions, and advance through refinement, proved to be a perfect framing as global leaders attempted to do a balancing act between Assertion, Accommodation and Advancement.

Assertion

Key conversations, quite notably with leaders from the West, reflected on the evolving international order, highlighting the decline of the post–Cold War Western-led order and the gradual emergence of multiple centres of global influence leading to a transition from a Western-dominated system towards a more complex and multipolar world. The discussions collectively emphasized how geopolitical power, institutional legitimacy, and strategic partnerships are being reshaped in the 21st century. There was a broad consensus that multipolarity should not necessarily be viewed as a source of instability; rather, if managed through diplomacy and cooperation, it could create a more balanced international system. The existing multilateral system that has undergone a massive rupture, evolved from systems that were designed to cater to specific historical inflection points (1918, 1945, 1989) and facilitate a distribution of power between the key players. They were not meant to adapt to shifting and emerging power dynamics. Countries outside the traditional Western power centres increasingly seek recognition of their agency, interests and perspectives, rather than accepting externally imposed narratives or policy prescriptions. To navigate this emergent shift in power dynamics, it is essential to approach it through pragmatic diplomacy, strategic autonomy and strategic empathy, enabling diversified partnerships as states navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape. As emerging economies and new political actors gain influence, multilateral institutions must evolve in order to remain legitimate and effective in addressing global challenges.

Accommodation

The background for this year's Raisina was particularly challenging as it came in the wake of the conflict between the US, Israel and Iran. The escalation began barely after Prime Minister Modi returned from an official visit to Israel at the invitation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu where they both "reiterated their unwavering commitment to advancing global peace and security". As if the optics of this weren't bad enough, a US submarine attacked and sank an Iranian Naval Ship – the IRIS Dena – in India's backyard, off the coast of Sri Lanka while it was heading home and was in international waters. This came in the midst of an extremely fragile India-US relationship due to multiple reasons: India prioritising its own interests by purchasing oil from Russia over the interests of the American partners, the US' role in the India-Pakistan conflict last year to name a few. Against this backdrop of rapidly escalating tensions, the Raisina Dialogue emerged as one of the first major multilateral platforms where the competing narratives and strategic positions surrounding the conflict in the Middle East were publicly articulated. India's laudable attempt to tackle the situation and perform a commendable strategic balancing act was palpable during the three days of the Dialogue. On the one hand, the Forum provided a space for India to engage with both Iran (Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Khatibzadeh) and Israel (Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar). It included remarks from the American Deputy Secretary of State

Christopher Landau on the conflict, curated spaces for policymakers and leaders to address critical questions around security from the standpoint of the Europeans and NATO, while engaging with all these actors and navigating, accentuating and negotiating India's own relationship with them on the other hand. India's balancing act involved maintaining constructive engagement with the Global South, the Global East, the rest of the West and the United States and pursuing its own agenda and interests on its own terms with them.

Advancement

The growing significance of India was visible through the presence of multiple parties courting India. India's growing economic weight, combined with the demographic dividend, technological development and democratic institutions make it an attractive and reliable partner for many parties from across the world, notably the European Union. A series of emerging conflicts over the past few years have highlighted how the Global South, notably India, has different worldviews and yet, through the unpredictability of the United States as the guarantor of the West, makes it absolutely necessary for the rest of the West to engage with India. There is an increasing acknowledgement of this fact among Europeans along with the realisation that the degree and level of alignment of interests can vary. Complementing that is a newly found willingness to accommodate the divergences in world views for an interest-based convergence to happen. The recently concluded India-EU Free Trade Agreement is a key example of the political leadership on both sides of the table imagining this convergence.

Having said that, the quality and the depth of this engagement will be determined by how efficiently the Europeans manage to map and navigate their *needs vs. wants*. At the moment, the list of European *needs* is quite long – the transatlantic relationship, the entanglement with China, redefining the European security architecture while navigating democratic challenges, economic and demographic decline. These structural pressures have forced European policymakers to prioritize immediate security and economic concerns within their immediate strategic environment. This leaves them with almost no spare resources and capacities to build a meaningful relationship with other Middle powers, including India. However big and urgent the *want* to engage with India is, it cannot realize its full potential until the EU truly chooses to engage with India, putting an emphasis on a comprehensive relationship that goes beyond the scope of pure economic relations. As two serious middle powers, India and the EU can build on each other's strengths, pursue joint approaches and interests across the world based on existing spheres of goodwill and influence. This will lay the groundwork for a meaningful entanglement, an inevitable convergence of interests shaped by an underlying congruency of values and purpose as both actors seek to navigate an increasingly multipolar international order. True to the spirit of *Saṁskāra*, they can accommodate their differences, be assertive in their role as the guardians of balance and advance the interests and strengths of middle powers thereby providing some sense of stability.

About the Author

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