

JIPSS

JOURNAL FOR INTELLIGENCE,
PROPAGANDA AND SECURITY STUDIES

Published by ACIPSS Vo1. 13, No. 2/2019

DESINFORMATION UND COVID-19: ÖSTERREICH UND DIE EUROPÄISCHE DIMENSION

von David C. Jaklin

PANDEMIE-DISKURSE: ÜBER DIE MANGELNDE FÄHIGKEIT, MIT UNSICHERHEIT ZURECHTZUKOMMEN

von Manfred Prisching

THE POWER OF FEAR. SOVIET INTELLIGENCE, THE POLITBURO, AND THE 1979 THREAT FROM AFGHANISTAN

by Michael Fredholm

INDIA'S SECURITY OUTLOOK: AN EXPLANATION THROUGH THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES APPROACH

by Aditi Malhotra

"WE NEVER SLEEP!" A DISCUSSION WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL (RET.) YOSSI KUPERWASSER

by Adrian Hänni and Duncan Bare



Aditi Malhotra

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Zusammenfassung:

INDIENS SICHERHEITSLAGE: EINE ERKLÄRUNG ANHAND DES MODELLS KONZENTRISCHER KREISE

Im asiatischen Raum werden die Auswirkungen globaler Machtverhältnisse immer spürbarer, insbesondere im Hinblick auf den gleichzeitigen Aufstieg zweier Großmächte, nämlich China und Indien. Während Chinas Entwicklung der vergangenen Jahre umfassend wissenschaftlich behandelt wurde, findet jene Indiens deutlich weniger Beachtung. Um diesem Trend zu begegnen und Indien als die bevölkerungsreichste Demokratie der Welt sowie dessen wachsendes wirtschaftliches und militärisches Potenzial zu erfassen, ist es unerlässlich, Indiens externe Sicherheitspolitik näher in den Blick zu nehmen. Der folgende Artikel wendet die Methode der konzentrischen Kreise an, um einen Überblick über die externe Sicherheitspolitik Neu-Delhis zu schaffen und deren militärische Dimension einzuordnen.

INTRODUCTION

At a time when the center of global power is shifting towards Asia, the world is witnessing the rise of two Asian powers, India and China, simultaneously. While China has attracted immense scholarly attention, India has received relatively limited consideration. The emergence of India has been one of the most crucial developments in Asia and the world. Despite its increasing relevance as a security actor regionally and globally, there is limited understanding on India's security outlook and its determinants. As the world's largest democracy with an emerging economy, and the second-largest military force globally, it becomes imperative to understand India's external security outlook and policy. This paper adopts the concentric circle approach to provide an overview of India's external security outlook and policies. It expands

on India's security imperatives and outlook in the immediate neighborhood (the first circle), the extended neighborhood (second circle), and at the global level (third circle). Within each region, New Delhi's security approach is informed by specific objectives and challenges, which are duly examined below.

THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLE APPROACH

The concentric circle approach emanates from the field of sociology. It was first introduced as a concentric zone model to explain urban social structures.¹ Inspired by the utility of this approach to explain complex cases, the approach has since been applied in several other disciplines including security studies and foreign policy. Scholars use the concentric circle approach to provide a layered understanding of a country's foreign policy and security priorities.

Concentric circles are expanding rings, which have a common center and can be viewed as “a hierarchy from the inside out.”² They also display an actor’s priorities by demonstrating the issues/regions of primary and secondary importance. Hence, the order of preference is illustrated through a number of concentric circles, which emanate from the state’s centre of gravity and expand outwards.

INDIA’S SECURITY OUTLOOK

India’s security outlook can be better understood through the concentric circle approach. The use of concentric circles in the Indian context can be traced back to the ancient Indian thinker and strategist Chanakya (also known as Kautilya), who applied the approach of “Circle of States” (Raj Mandala) to safeguard India’s relations with the unstable neighborhood.³ The contemporary relevance of this approach in explaining India’s security strategy is apparent in the speeches of Indian government officials and noted Indian commentators such as Raja Mohan.⁴

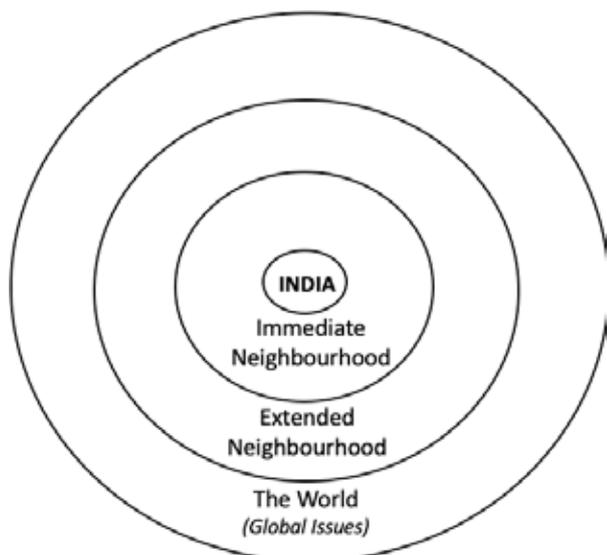


Fig. 1: Concentric Circles and India’s Security Outlook. Source: Author’s own representation.

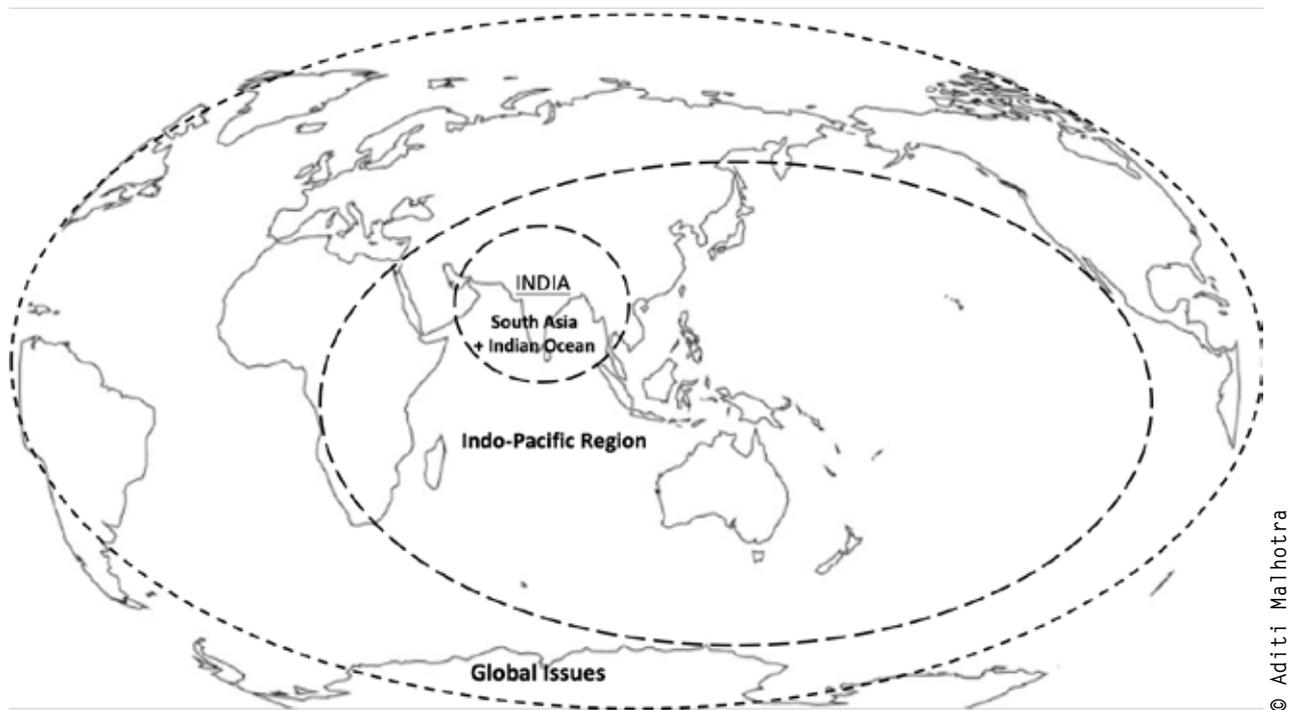
At the axis or center lies India’s national interests. The first concentric circle includes India’s immediate neighborhood (South Asia + Indian Ocean), followed by the second circle, which expands across the extended neighborhood (Indo-Pacific Region). The last circle signifies the global level and covers the issues of global importance. As will be explained, India’s self-conception and definition of the immediate neighborhood, and the extended neighborhood has altered over the course of history. These changes have been largely informed by India’s changing

ability to project power and its interactions with major powers.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

India’s security considerations have been largely influenced by the conflicts with its neighbors since gaining independence in 1947. It is pertinent to underline the colonial legacy of India’s frontiers. Both the disputed borders with Pakistan and China emerged out of colonial Great Britain’s intense sensitivity of a Russian advance into the Indian sub-continent (Rudyard Kipling termed the moves and counter-moves as the Great Game).⁵ If one traces the evolution of India’s security outlook since 1947, it becomes clear that India’s attention towards each region has varied over time. Simultaneously, even the geographical expanse of each region – immediate neighborhood and extended neighborhood – has changed from decade to decade. To expand on this, from 1947 to the mid-1960s, India’s policies concentrated on South Asia (first circle) and the extended neighborhood (second circle), which included the Asian continent and the Indian Ocean (IO). While India positioned itself as a dominant security actor in South Asia, it sought political influence, rather than dominance, in the extended neighborhood and at the global level. This was pursued through the policy of non-alignment and by establishing itself as a leader of the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War.

From the mid-1960s onwards, India’s security approach and priorities underwent a transformation. The changes became apparent in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian Border War in 1962, wherein India suffered a military defeat at the hands of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The situation was compounded by domestic political challenges after the death of India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and financial woes due to the insular state of its economy. As a result of these developments, India’s attention centered only on the immediate neighborhood. The extended neighborhood remained on the back burner for decades. During this period, New Delhi strived to establish itself as a powerful security actor in South Asia. This was demonstrated in India’s extensive support to the liberation movement in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) against West Pakistan. In 1971, after Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan, India emerged as the predominant power



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Fig. 2: India's Security Outlook in Concentric Circles. Source: Author's own representation.

in the subcontinent and acted as the regional security provider. It continued to strengthen its interests and position in the immediate neighborhood and strongly discouraged any external (direct or indirect) involvement.⁶ Other illustrations of India's security policies during this period include its political and military efforts to end the civilian conflict in Sri Lanka and military involvement to end/defeat the coup on the Maldives. Because the Indian leadership and policymakers were preoccupied by their security imperatives in South Asia, New Delhi had limited political energy and resources to divert towards the extended neighborhood and beyond. Therefore, India displayed a limited security role in the realm of the second and third concentric circle.

This continued until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marking the end of the Cold War. The disintegration of the USSR – India's most important partner during the Cold War – proved to be a serious challenge for New Delhi; economically, militarily, and politically. An unprecedented financial crisis at home only exacerbated the situation and compelled the Indian leadership to undertake massive economic reforms in 1991-92.⁷ The strong security approach was suddenly replaced with an economic outlook and a desire to project New Delhi as a benign and cooperative regional power in all the three concentric circles. As a result, the long-standing security focus on the primary concentric circle abated considerably. This trend, however, continued for less than a decade.

The next major transformation took place with India's nuclear tests in May 1998, which sparked a series of nuclear tests by Pakistan. The following year, India and Pakistan were engaged in an armed conflict in Kargil (Kashmir) after the Pakistan army infiltrated the Line of Control (LoC) (denoting the mutually accepted position of both armies when fighting ended after the 1971 War).⁸ These events brought security issues back to the forefront. With the turn of the millennium, New Delhi once again revived its security focus on the immediate neighborhood while also seeking to incrementally establish a security role in the extended neighborhood. Over the next two decades, India attempted to maintain its predominance on the Indian subcontinent, expand its security and political influence in the extended neighborhood, and situate itself as a relevant security actor at the global level.

CONTEMPORARY EXTERNAL SECURITY OUTLOOK

India's contemporary external security outlook can be illustrated as widening concentric circles as shown in Figure 2.⁹ Akin to Figure 1, the axis is India. The second circle has remained consistent since India's independence and comprises the immediate neighborhood, i.e. South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and the northern IO. The second concentric

circle is what tends to wax and wane depending on New Delhi's economic, political or/and military clout. Unlike the preceding decades (from the late 1960s to the early 2000s), India emerged as an economic powerhouse since the mid-2000s and the regional reconfigurations altered due to the rise of China. In light of this, New Delhi has embraced the Indo-Pacific region (next circle), which in the words of the present Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "stretches from the shores of Africa to those of the Americas."¹⁰ The third and last circle signifies the world and entails the "over-arching global issues".¹¹ The expansiveness of the circle remains similar to previous years although it needs to be acknowledged that New Delhi's responsibilities at the global scale have expanded incrementally.

THE IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORHOOD: SOUTH ASIA AND THE NORTHERN INDIAN OCEAN

The immediate neighborhood forms the primary area of interest from New Delhi's point of view. According to Raja Mohan, India seeks "primacy and a veto over the actions of outside powers" in this region.¹² Bolstered by sustained economic growth from 2003 to 2010 (despite a slump in 2008) and increased potential for regional power projection, New Delhi sees itself as the regional leader in South Asia and the "provider of net security" in the IO.¹³ To illustrate, the Indian naval fleet currently operates 140 warships, 220 aircraft and is planning to expand further by introducing 56 more warships and 6 new submarines in the coming decade.¹⁴ With its expanding resources, the Indian Navy has remained active in undertaking various tasks. These range from securing the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the IO and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, to anti-piracy operations and port calls over great distance.¹⁵ While some regional countries are supportive of India's expanding security role – such as Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Maldives – other countries are either ambivalent (Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) or staunchly oppose it.¹⁶ The strongest opposition to India comes from its northern neighbor, Pakistan. Needless to state, India-Pakistan rivalry is one of the key features shaping the security landscape in South Asia.

To this day, India-Pakistan relations remain frosty due to the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K),

and Pakistan's sustained sub-conventional military strategy against India.¹⁷ Pakistan depends on the use of militant proxies and support to Islamist insurgencies, which is a "primary component of Pakistani grand strategy".¹⁸ As argued by S. Paul Kapur, militant proxies have allowed Pakistan to ensure attrition of "Indian military resources, ejecting India from the disputed territory of Kashmir, and gaining strategic depth through the installation of a friendly regime in Afghanistan".¹⁹ India and Pakistan have fought three major wars (1947-48, 1965 and 1971 for the liberation of Bangladesh) and been involved in major conflicts such as Kargil, standoff in 2001 over the attack on the Indian Parliament, and also indulge in frequent ceasefire violations across the Line of Control.²⁰ India has faced a number of terrorist attacks from Pakistan-based groups such as the 2008 Mumbai attack, which was perpetrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba.²¹ Unsurprisingly, relations have remained abrasive. Particularly bloody periods, such as during the 2016 Uri attack, have invited Indian responses in the form of limited strikes against militants based across the LoC.²² In 2019, a suicide bombing on an Indian paramilitary convoy in Pulwama claimed to be orchestrated by Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed led to retaliatory Indian airstrikes in Balakot (Pakistan).²³ Frequent border skirmishes continue to exacerbate the animosity between the two neighbors.

Pakistan's perpetual desire to counter India's geopolitical influence in the region is also manifested in the China-Pakistan military partnership. India shares border disputes with both, Pakistan and China. The shared China-Pakistan discomfort with India's regional ambitions act as a glue for their increasingly comprehensive military partnership. Cooperation in the area of security can be traced back to the 1960s and continued to evolve over the years. Their strong military ties are reflected in Chinese supply of military equipment to Pakistan, Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missile programs, Beijing's support to upgrade defense production infrastructure facilities such as Heavy Rebuild Factory (HRF) and Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC), etc.²⁴ The strategic Gwadar port in Pakistan is also operated by a Chinese firm and the Chinese also are involved in the modernization of Pakistan's Navy through sales of naval assets, etc.²⁵ That China and Pakistan (both nuclear-armed countries) work together to undercut India's political influence only adds to the precarious regional dynamics.

Given the rise of China, the security landscape in the immediate region has become more complex. In the last decade, India and China have experienced transgressions along the disputed border. 2017 saw one of the most intense border standoffs in Doklam, a disputed territory situated at the trijunction of Bhutan, India, and China. The standoff, which was sparked by China's move to construct a road in the area, continued for more than two months until the two sides disengaged.²⁶ Another major challenge that India faces within the first concentric circle is the growing Chinese influence, especially in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this context, the most concerning development for India appears to be the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Indian officials maintain that CPEC "passes through parts of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir under illegal occupation of Pakistan."²⁷

Apart from Pakistan, Myanmar is another country in India's immediate neighborhood that is immensely dependent on China militarily, economically, and for diplomatic support internally. This is despite Naypyidaw and New Delhi's consistently growing ties since 2000. The Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) relies heavily on Chinese arms sales, which accounted for 61% of Myanmar's weapons imports between 2014 and 2018. By dint of Beijing's relations with armed ethnic groups based in Myanmar, it remains a crucial political stakeholder in the country's peace process. Beijing's political support to Naypyidaw in the absence of Myanmar's meaningful engagement with the West also strengthens Beijing's influence with the leadership of Myanmar. In addition to Myanmar, other South Asian countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have developed closer relations with Beijing in order to reap benefits through BRI's infrastructure projects and loans.²⁸ Not only has this resulted in greater Chinese influence, especially following debt traps as seen in the case of Sri Lanka and Pakistan; it has also enabled China to make physical inroads in India's immediate neighborhood. Debt trap refers to the situation wherein underdeveloped or developed countries accumulate massive loans from China for infrastructure projects, which economic experts believe may be extremely difficult to repay. In these circumstances, China, being the lender, is able to earn economic or political concessions from defaulting countries, which erodes the lender's sense of sovereignty. Much to

the consternation of New Delhi, the smaller South Asian countries have been utilizing the China card as a bargaining chip to earn more leverage with India. These trends have driven Indian policy/security planners to revive their focus on engaging the immediate neighborhood more extensively than was the case in the mid to late 1990s.

Further ahead, China's presence in the IO has increased manifold and been a cause of concern. China's first overseas naval base in Djibouti further accentuated India's anxiety over Beijing's growing security potential in the region. Adding to this, state-owned Chinese companies have been operating the Gwadar port (Pakistan), Hambantota port (Sri Lanka); are involved in financing a container shipping facility in Chittagong (Bangladesh); and are developing the deep-sea port of Kyunkpyu (Myanmar). That all these strategic projects tend to encircle India from the East, West, and South adds to India's suspicions over Chinese intent in the IO and is termed by many scholars and analysts as China's "string of pearls."²⁹ In order to counter this perceived encirclement, New Delhi has been beefing up its military infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, which includes a full-fledged naval base, Indian naval station (INS) Kohassa.³⁰ In 2015, New Delhi also commissioned INS Kadamba, the "world's largest naval base east of the Suez Canal."³¹ India has been reaching out to the various island states in the IO to expand its security clout. For instance, India and Seychelles agreed to build military infrastructure in the Assumption Islands³² and New Delhi is finalizing facilities in Oman (Duqm port) and Iran (Chahbahar port). Additionally, India has been providing assistance to other countries in the region in terms of maritime capacity building. For this purpose, India has offered lines of credit to some countries.³³ Further, India and Mauritius in 2015 signed an agreement to enhance sea and air transport facilities at the Agaléga island.³⁴ Despite facing some local protests in Assumption and Agaléga islands, the agreements remain in place.³⁵ Finally, notwithstanding delays and deficiencies in implementation, India has been working towards consolidating its own position in the immediate neighborhood, fortifying the already-existing linkages, investing in its military capabilities; while also trying to ward off Chinese growing weight in the region.

THE EXTENDED NEIGHBORHOOD: THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific region forms the next concentric circle and is the secondary area of interest. The logic behind the concept of Indo-Pacific (as used in the current geostrategic vocabulary) first emerged in 2007 when Prime Minister Abe Shinzō of Japan elucidated on the growing connectedness between the IO and the Pacific Ocean. The concept matured over the years to finally become a part of the lexicon of numerous countries and organizations including India, US, Japan, ASEAN, and others. While New Delhi was initially reluctant to embrace the new construct, it received immense support from the US and its allies, namely Japan and at times Australia, to take up a greater regional role.³⁶ Within the Indo-Pacific, India wants to “balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests.”³⁷ This ensures that India’s interests are not compromised in the midst of major power competition in the region.³⁸

India’s fundamental security interests lie in the crucial Sea Lines of Communications that enable its international trade and energy imports. India also has energy exploration interests, East of the Strait of Malacca and in the South China Sea, given the country’s growing energy appetite. That China regards the SCS as its own territory, India’s interest in the region adds another layer of complications in their bilateral relations. Overall, India views itself as a relevant security player with leverage to shape events in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to clarify that India does not see itself as the security player in Indo-Pacific but one of the crucial security actors, along with other powers such as the US, Japan, and others. Its assistance to countries such as Vietnam through defense credit lines, actions as the first responder in the Indian Ocean Region in HADR activities, frequent naval port calls to SEA and EA countries, allowing Singapore access of Indian facilities for military training, etc. reflects New Delhi’s attempt to carve a security role for itself in the region. Apart from holding bilateral and trilateral military exercises with a number of regional and extra-regional countries, India is also looking to (re)venture into quadrilateral security exercises that include the US, Australia and Japan.³⁹

Despite India’s prevarication in official statements, there is little doubt that the concept of the Indo-Pacific

developed due to the changes in the regional order following China’s rise and its military assertiveness.⁴⁰ In light of the strategic flux that has ensued, India has grown more cognizant of the dangers of letting one power (read: a hostile China) dominate the regional landscape. In a bid to carve a niche for itself in the Indo-Pacific, India has been consolidating its security and diplomatic connections with countries in Africa (South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, etc.); West Asia (Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, etc.); Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, etc.); East Asia (Japan, South Korea); Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands); and the US, which remains a dominant actor in the regional security order alongside European states that have been active with its anti-piracy missions in the region.⁴¹

INDIA AND THE WORLD

In terms of the last circle, i.e. the global level, India seeks to position itself as one of the “key player[s] in international peace and security.”⁴² India’s engagement at the international level has seen exponential rise since the 2000s. India’s economic emergence, democratic credentials, enhanced political clout, and improved power projection capabilities have attracted international interest. India is seen by the US and most of its allies as a global swing state, which is quintessential in light of China’s rise.⁴³ According to Richard Fontaine and Daniel Kliman, swing states refers to “nations that possess large and growing economies, occupy central positions in a region or stand at the hinge of multiple regions, and embrace democratic government at home.”⁴⁴ They add that swing states’ approach towards the global order is “more fluid and open” than established powers.⁴⁵ As a result, the decisions made by countries such as India tend to “decisively influence the course of world affairs.”⁴⁶

Since 2004-05, there has been greater consciousness within India about its growing relevance in the changing world order. Concurrently, the expectations of external powers towards India has heightened wherein they expect New Delhi to assume greater responsibilities in issues of global importance such as climate change. Not only has New Delhi warmed up to the idea of taking on greater responsibilities (especially in areas where external expectations align with Indian interests). It has also grown ambitious in pursuing an international role in pertinent security

issues. This includes the involvement in peacekeeping operations even as it experiences a gap between some of its rhetoric and actions, especially when it comes to implementing policies to combat climate change, embracing the nuclear test ban treaty, etc.⁴⁷ Even as India continues to position itself as an actor of global relevance, there is a “central ambivalence” within its attempts.⁴⁸ Kate Sullivan argues that on the one hand, India wants to be accepted as a pivotal actor by the established major powers, but on the other, it also seeks to project itself as championing the cause of South-South cooperation.⁴⁹

Internationally, India supports a multipolar world order, within which it seeks to “take its rightful place in the community of nations.”⁵⁰ In terms of foreign policy, India pursues the multi-alignment strategy, which enables New Delhi to bolster its position at the global level. Multi-alignment places emphasis on engaging a number of partners on a range of issues and becoming more actively involved in regional multilateral institutions.⁵¹ Informed by this logic, in recent years, New Delhi has become more pro-active in seeking memberships in a number of regional and sub-regional groupings such as ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the African Union, etc. By doing this, Indian planners hope to become more involved in broader regional affairs including some relevant security issues.

In a bid to assert more influence in global governance, India champions the cause of United Nations (UN) reforms. It seeks a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and consistently seeks international support for this issue. Until any worthwhile reforms are undertaken, India has periodically depended on its partners among the permanent members of the UNSC (read: the US, France, Russia) to exert some influence on areas of interest. Furthermore, New Delhi has held a non-permanent seat at the UNSC for multiple terms. One of the major Indian contributions as a global security actor is its extensive involvement in UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs), and instituting training and capacity-building initiatives

in this realm. As of 2019, more than 200,000 troops have been deployed for UNPKOs.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Historically, India constituted an important part of the landmass vacated by the British. Its historical sense of being at the crossroads of empires dates back several centuries. It was therefore natural for India to inherit both the challenges and advantages that come with having long, yet unsettled borders and being a vast peninsula overlooking the Indian Ocean including some of the major global trading routes. Nevertheless, as shown in this article, India’s security outlook depends greatly on development in the first concentric circle followed by the second one. India’s primary focus area is the immediate neighborhood, which also poses the biggest challenge for its security and foreign policy planners. While India’s animosity with Pakistan has remained a near-constant since its early days, the phenomenon of China’s rise and its growing influence in South Asia and IO has introduced new quandary for India. In midst of these developments, India has been trying to secure its position by focusing on security infrastructure development and assisting other countries in the region. How India manages its security challenges in the inner most circle and trajectory of its economic rise will determine whether or not its concentric circles get expanded or further constricted. Furthermore, India’s geo-strategic orientation continues to attract the attention of emerging world powers as well as guide India’s own regional or global ambitions. As covered above, with support from the US and its allies, India has become more open to embrace the new construct of Indo-Pacific and seeks to incrementally expand its security interactions in the region. At the same time, it has been attempting to undertake greater global security responsibilities but remains short of transforming its rhetoric into actions, especially in areas where they diverge with India’s national interests.

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1-2 Scheme: Aditi Malhotra