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## India Now the World's Swing Vote

by Gordon G. Chang | October 2026

China is mobilizing multilateral groups and sending them into battle against the United States.

There is, however, one fundamental problem for an ambitious Beijing: India, which is now playing a pivotal role in the region and beyond. New Delhi has been frustrating Beijing's efforts to use two groupings, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, to further its main diplomatic goals.

New Delhi does not always oppose China's initiatives, however. For instance, on the first day of September India joined China, Russia, and the other SCO members in adopting the Bishkek Declaration when the organization in the Kyrgyz capital concluded its 26th summit.

The declaration was clearly anti-American. It condemned "military strikes against the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which resulted in numerous civilian casualties and significant damage to the country's economy." These attacks, the declaration stated, "violate the principles and norms of international law and the UN Charter, and create serious risks to international peace, security, and stability."

The Bishkek Declaration also expressed "sincere condolences" for the "tragic death of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei" and affirmed "support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Iran. The document said the members "oppose unilateral coercive measures" not endorsed by the UN or the World Trade Organization.

The SCO also affirmed Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran is a member of the group.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assent to the SCO statement was significant. "The scripted, Bishkek-hosted, Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit would normally be an event that even the most ardent geopolitical analysts would snooze through," Blaine Holt, a retired U.S. Air Force general and China watcher, told me. "This year is different."<sup>2</sup>

Concern about India's embrace of China's position reinforce fears that the world is moving away from the U.S. For instance, CNN reported that the "China-Led SCO Summit Puts Global Power Shift on Display."<sup>3</sup>

India, fortunately for the free world, has by no means defected to America's adversaries and enemies.

"All of the heads of state made identical speeches, save one," Holt pointed out, referring to the SCO summit. "Modi pledged allegiance to no group or nation. India going it alone, as we saw with its dissent at the last BRICS confab, may draw ire in Beijing and Moscow, and Delhi's recalcitrance works well for Washington, which does not need a new alliance to confront now."<sup>4</sup>

India is the only SCO member that has not endorsed China's world-spanning Belt and Road Initiative, and New Delhi is the only member blocking the organization from

supporting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Beijing's flagship infrastructure project in South Asia.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the SCO is not the tool that Beijing contemplated when it established the group in 2001. "China's Xi Jinping is urging the inert group to play a more active role in global security, well beyond the initial economic cooperation rationale for the organization," said Holt, who once served as deputy U.S. military advisor to NATO.<sup>6</sup> New Delhi has blocked these efforts.

Similarly, India has consistently stymied Chinese efforts to push BRICS beyond an economic focus. Even on economic matters, New Delhi has opposed Beijing's initiatives. For instance, it has stopped the establishment of a common BRICS currency,<sup>7</sup> a Chinese project to attack the dollar.

In September, Modi hosted the XVIII BRICS Summit, which coincided with the 20th anniversary of the formation of the group. The 140-point New Delhi Declaration was notably softer in tone than the Bishkek one. Moreover, the BRICS declaration did not endorse a new group currency.<sup>8</sup> Because India has consistently opposed Beijing in BRICS, the organization has been notably short of accomplishments throughout its two decades.

Beijing should not be surprised by India's opposition. The two giants, after all, are decades-old rivals.

From its founding in 1950, the Republic of India has tried to establish cordial ties with its Chinese neighbor. The first Indian Prime

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Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, set the tone with “Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai,” a slogan promoting the notion that the two Asian nations were brothers.

Beijing never shared the warm feelings, however. In the middle of the 1970s, for instance, the Chinese began helping Pakistan build a nuclear weapon to keep arch-rival India off balance.

China also supported Islamabad’s campaign of terror against the Indian state. For example, the terrorists who attacked Mumbai hotels in November 2008 used Chinese equipment; China has supplied Pakistan with ordinance that it has turned over to terrorist groups; communications equipment used by terrorists in India is Chinese-made and routed through the Pakistani army; and Chinese training for Pakistani personnel was, with Beijing’s knowledge, provided to terrorists. Pakistan-based terrorists who conducted the horrific Pahalgam attack in April 2025 were carrying equipment sourced in China.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan fought the 87-hour war in May of last year with advanced Chinese weapons.<sup>10</sup> Beijing has used its permanent Security Council seat to shield Pakistani-supported terrorists from U.N. sanctions.

Moreover, China and India cannot reconcile until Beijing drops territorial claims to large portions of India, such as the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The two countries fought a brief border war in 1962, which resulted in the Chinese taking crucial territory—about 24,000

square miles—from an out-matched Indian army. Since then, more than four decades of border talks have proved fruitless.

Both sides have also spilled blood during the period. China, most notably, launched a surprise attack on an Indian position during the night of June 15, 2020 in the Galwan Valley, the northernmost of the three areas of Chinese incursion. In a premediated move, Chinese troops killed 20 Indian soldiers. It was the first deadly confrontation between the two giants in 45 years. China is thought to have suffered at least 45 killed in the Galwan clash, as both India and Russia’s state news agency Tass<sup>11</sup> have estimated.

The attack galvanized Indian society. The government immediately severed existing relationships with Chinese parties, barred future public contracts, blocked investments totaling \$2 billion,<sup>12</sup> effectively prohibited China’s Huawei Technologies and ZTE from the 5G network,<sup>13</sup> suspended tourist visas, and banned TikTok and 117 other Chinese apps.<sup>14</sup> Since then, tensions have cooled, but the disputes are ultimately rooted in irreconcilable differences.

“China and India are Asia’s two principal geopolitical rivals, locked in an enduring competition rooted in an unresolved Himalayan border dispute and competing visions of regional and global orders,” Kamran Bokhari, a strategic forecaster and senior resident fellow at the Middle East Policy Council, wrote to me this September.<sup>15</sup>

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In this brutal competition, New Delhi has been looking for supporters. Ultimately, India, to maintain strategic independence from adversary China and even long-time friend Russia, needs America. And along with America come America's allies: India has moved closer to countries aligned with Washington, especially Japan.

India and Japan have a long history of defense cooperation, and in recent years both sides have deepened the relationship. For the first time ever, Japan sent jet fighters to India for joint exercises. Three F-2 jets from the 8th Air Wing at Tsuiki Air Base participated in the Veer Guardian 26 exercise, which began at the Jodhpur Air Force Station in Rajasthan on September 9.<sup>16</sup>

Just as China, with its hard-to-justify territorial claims and pro-Pakistan actions, has pushed India away, Chinese hostility has moved countries toward India, as the Veer Guardian exercise symbolizes. China's regime has been engaged in a relentless propaganda campaign against Tokyo since November when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made comments on the floor of the Diet relating to Taiwan.<sup>17</sup>

Japan and India form half of the "Quad," a defense-oriented grouping also including the U.S. and Australia. Beijing is particularly sensitive about the Quad as it is seen—correctly—as a counterforce to China.

India and China, despite everything, have managed to keep intense competition within bounds. "This strategic antagonism," Bokhari

noted, "coexists with deep geoeconomic interdependence, as both countries remain embedded in extensive trade networks and overlapping institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization."<sup>18</sup>

As the *Wall Street Journal's* Sadanand Dhume reports, beginning in 2024 both Beijing and New Delhi have made small steps to repair ties.<sup>19</sup> "Economic linkages," said Bokhari, "give both sides powerful incentives to compartmentalize their relationship, letting trade and institutional cooperation continue through periodic military flare-ups along the disputed frontier."<sup>20</sup>

Yet there is a limit as to the progress the pair can make. Dhume points out that relations remain "fragile" and "an India-China rapprochement isn't in the cards."<sup>21</sup>

Prime Minister Modi this decade has played cards shrewdly, and in the global struggle between the United States and China he has not chosen either one of them. Modi will almost certainly continue what has been described as its balancing act, an approach India adopted in the Cold War. "This is the essence of strategic autonomy," writes the *Hindustan Times*, summarizing the thoughts of Shishir Gupta, the executive editor of that New Delhi paper. "India will engage with multiple powers but will not allow any one relationship to define its national choices."<sup>22</sup>

India, if not already, will become the world's most important swing state. The country is already the world's most populous one and,

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propelled by an ideal demography, its economy is roaring. There is, consequently, a sense of optimism—and assertion—in the Indian capital.

In the Cold War, New Delhi, although non-aligned, often sided with the Soviet Union, so which way will New Delhi ultimately lean in the current struggle between Washington and Beijing?

As an initial matter, India, like all countries, will tend to bandwagon with the strong. Russia, losing the war it started in Ukraine, is failing. China is plagued by worsening and intractable economic problems that are becoming obvious. Widespread purges, especially in the Chinese military, suggest political instability. The impending demographic collapse—China will probably be only a third of its size at the turn of the century—will significantly diminish what the Chinese state can accomplish. Of the three nations that now might be considered superpowers, only the U.S. is powering ahead. President Donald Trump is not wrong when he says, as he often does, that America is “the hottest country in the world.”

Unfortunately, India does not look at Washington as reliable. President Joe Biden’s disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 caught New Delhi, which had supported the Kabul government, off-guard. That move, consequently, delegitimized America’s friends in the Indian capital.

Trump, for his part, has undone decades of Washington’s bridge-building to New Delhi with his tariffs, especially those for buying Russian oil, and by reorienting American policy toward Pakistan. It has not helped that Trump has ignored the Quad and treated American allies poorly. His “erratic foreign policy,” Dhume reports, “has weakened India’s China hawks.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Trump’s China-friendly policies have unnerved Indian policymakers. As Dhume notes, Trump “has mused about creating a G-2 compact with China, which would be a nightmare for India’s foreign-policy establishment.”<sup>24</sup> Although Trump’s conciliatory talk masks a fierce contest that he is in fact waging with China, his words create the impression that he is ditching friends and partners in order to create a relationship with Beijing. That means, among other things, that nations, like India, believe they cannot now count on America.

India may not want to choose between America and China, but as the rivalry intensifies, New Delhi—all others as well—will have less room to maneuver as Beijing and Washington engage in far more coercive diplomacy. India did not have to choose in the Cold War, but that struggle did not break out into global warfare. That could happen now, however. At this moment, as in the 1930s, there are separate wars. Then, those conflicts merged into what we now call World War II. The same thing could happen soon, and if that does occur it is unlikely that India will be able to stay non-aligned for long. Even now, Finland dropped decades and Sweden dropped centuries of non-aligned status and joined NATO this decade.

When India will have to choose, its free society will have a lot more in common with America’s than China’s totalitarian state.

At least for the moment, however, Prime Minister Modi is friendly to many but friends with none. As Gupta of the *Hindustan Times* said, “India goes with India.”<sup>25</sup>

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