

Global and Regional Expectations from Emerging Powers: A Case for India Navigating Through Conflicts and Synergy

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the Cold War, shared ideas and interests have led to the rise of numerous international organizations. With the United Nations at the center as the world's largest intergovernmental organization, membership in such global organizations has been a matter of prestige, recognition, and opportunities for many nations on top of common securities of different kinds. However, a trend in the rise of regional organization, more so in the post-Cold War world, has hinted at decentralization and diversification of interests by non-western countries. Emerging regional powers like India, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia etc. have remained at the forefront of this development where global superpowers are struggling to find better footing in this crowded arena of regional groups. This research article argues that the difference in expectations of global powers and developing and small economies from the emerging regional powers compels them to counterbalance by adding more weight to each side. This leads to the rise of new regional organizations in the form of 'trade blocs' or 'regional cooperation' and at the same time increases the participation of these emerging powers in global organizations. This article analyses the case of India as an emerging regional power caught in this game of counterbalancing expectations between its regional partners and its global counterparts. India must navigate its way through this conundrum while prioritizing its uniform national interest which often comes in between the said expectations.

Keywords: Emerging Regional Power, Regional Organizations, Counterbalancing, Global powers

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Introduction

The attempts to explain the genesis of regional organizations (ROs) in the post-world-war era have largely remained confined to the established problem-solving theoretical approaches. The core ideas to conjure security to safeguard economic recovery through rational means of the time such as ‘hedging’, ‘bandwagoning’, ‘defensive regionalism’, ‘binding’ or simply powering up, have remained adequate to justify the rise of ROs. The conventional and prevailing frameworks of neorealism, and neoliberal institutionalism, securitization and constructivism remains Eurocentric as usual and ‘excessively abstract’. The qualitative and quantitative assessments to describe and chart the trajectory of ROs accounts to states growing in power and their common approach to rational engagements with their counterparts and dependents.

However, the Cold War bipolarity and churning of power amid ‘the great nuclear uncertainty’ left little choice among small and struggling nations to have any substantial regional aspirations. Surging globalization by the end of the Cold War fueled by technological advancements, intertwined economic ties and cultural interconnectedness on shared environmental and humanitarian concerns laid the foundation for these nations to raise their regional banners. As a result, the years reaching the end of the cold war witnessed a proliferation of many regional organizations such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), The African Union (AU), Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) etc. The global organizations controlled and influenced by leading superpowers like the US and European Union have since tried to stand their ground in these third-world regions. Although multipolarity is becoming the key characteristic of the 21st-century international system, these regional organizations cannot be easily swayed by Western powers in the presence of their favored regional emerging powers.

The regional powers of contemporary times such as India, Brazil and South Africa have long been regarded as changemakers of the prevailing world order. These regional powers have offered a cross-paradigmatic purview to the small and struggling economies (Stephen, 2016). The possibility that they may break free from long endured exploitation and playing pawn in the power games of the developed north, has raised their expectations from their regional

elders. These expectations have reciprocated in the form of stronger advocacy towards the core independent interests of regional powers on global platforms. Also, regional powers now have a stronger voice in common security and economic and environmental concerns. Multipolarity has emerged as a scope and aspiration for these regional powers where regional organizations tend to create structural support in their favour (Destradi et al., 2018). However, the growing interdependency in this technology-driven era may not let this new order come to the surface yet.

This research study thus, investigates these intersections of expectations, their design and support structure, creating a barrier where the regional emerging powers struggle to decide which way to turn. The leading global powers like the US, EU, Russia, and China have their favoured global organizations where they seek to lure small developing economies to maintain the status quo and further their interests. On the other hand, there are emerging powers like India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and Turkey who seek to resist continuous negging, hegemonic and alluring influences by drawing ‘courage’ and favour from regional organizations constituted by the same small and struggling developing economies. On that note, this article does a critical analysis of India’s approach in this predicament where its decades of efforts and experience in maintaining a neutral stance in the superpower tug of war has helped in achieving synergy or just an appearance of it.

Regional Emerging Powers and Their Enduring Challenges

The first decade of the 21st century has laid the foundations for the reconfiguration of global order. The true multipolarity as predicted by Samuel Huntington in 1999 has been settling down through repeated hammering of events starting from 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the economic crisis of 2008, the rise of China with Xi-Jinping, the Russian annexation of Crimea and many more blows after that (Nolte, 2010). These events have been eroding the credibility of US and Russia-led stability in the previous century global order which was nowhere to be found since the beginning of this century. The space created has since been captured by emerging powers among which China has taken the lead long back (Nel, 2010). The question thus arises, Will all international politics be played at regional levels? How will these emerging powers balance among their contenders, promoters and support structure?

The regional powers, in a sense that differentiate them and justify their stature can be extrapolated in these three assumptions, a) regional powers coming together can summon the

power to pursue specific reformist agendas in the dynamic global order b) They can carry functional responsibilities as described by David Mitrany with the help of regional organizations (K. D. A., 1944) and c) they can resolve disputes and conflicts among themselves without any higher power intervention. The first assumption can be observed through the goals and synergy between member states of the IBSA Dialogue Forum. This group established in 2003 by India, Brazil and South Africa aimed to raise the regional political issues of the global south and offer them a stage through their voices in prominent global organizations. Some even argue that IBSA is set out to secure “redistribution of power, wealth and privilege in the global economy” (Nel, 2010). Although these three nations are also part of a more renowned BRICS+, together they certainly showcase a unique identity which does not reciprocate with Russia and China, both being members of BRICS as much as it does with the rest of the global south.

IBSA along with BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and a novel initiative called International Solar Alliance (ISA) have shown commitments to cater to the functional regional responsibilities. Their goals are directed to reach a common favourable ground in the said functional areas like transport and infrastructure, trade Facilitation and Investment, communication technologies, water resources management, clean and renewable energy, agriculture, health, culture, education and tourism. This projects self-sufficiency in key functional areas where the entire region can look up to them and rely on them (Haran, 2018). Similarly, the manifestation of the third assumption can be observed among the members of regional organizations like ASEAN, the African Union (AU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The principles of non-interference among internal issues of member states and having a mechanism to resolve disputes peacefully make ASEAN the most ‘preferred’ and influential entity of the region (Goh, 2007). The core objectives of AU and CELAC also reflect similar commitments where achieving a single voice through economic-socio-cultural-political integration remains among their founding principles.

Although globalization encourages this regionalism as it has become multidimensional in contrast to the old regionalist theories of the 60s and 70s, some inherent challenges are sprouting from the interdependency and “shadow institutionalization”. *Buzan* and *Weaver* in their seminal work “Regions and Powers” along with *Katzenstein*’s “A World of Regions” have shown a great deal of fervour towards the regionalization of the emerging world order

(Acharya, 2007). But their viewpoint/ approach of ‘regional structuring of international security’ with the US on top, followed by Russia, China, Japan and EU in the second order contradicts their arguments hailing regional autonomy. The essence of Regional Security Complexes (RSC) that a region must have a central axis of power or a patron or a guardian to gain autonomy, security and a position in the regional structure does not sit well with many regional organizations of this century which have been created or now evolved to resist the hegemony of first and second order powers. The above-mentioned ‘inherent challenges’ to multidimensional regionalism thus emerge as an offset to the said resistance. The first and second-order powers in *Buzan* and *Weaver’s* regional structure use ‘interdependency’ of various kinds to constrain and control regional organizations and institutions (Kelly, 2007). The term Shadow Institutionalization thus refers to the regional institutions and organizations which are created or compromised to serve the interests and agendas of first and second-order powers with or without being a part or member of them. These challenges may come from dependency on the prevailing economic activities of a region or its emerging power. The pressure points as simple and obvious as major trade routes and SLOCs, critical minerals, energy needs, food and medical supplies, defence imports and communication, transport and industrial technologies can be used to curtail the autonomy of regional power and its favoured regional organization. In the contemporary international political landscape, emerging powers such as India, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia recurrently find themselves at the crossroads of intense competition between established global powers, primarily the United States and its European allies, and the burgeoning partnership of China and Russia. These major powers exert pressure on various fronts, aiming to sway these rising nations into their respective spheres of influence and secure their allegiance (Chivvis & Geaghan-Breiner, 2024). History has taught us that in wars and pandemics, the global powers seek to capitalize and exploit small powers and weak regions whereas regional powers seek to gain footing and more influence in the region. But such is the nature of anarchic global order and hence the challenges are ‘inherent’ and enduring.

India’s Rise as an Emerging Regional Power and the Dimensions of Regional Expectations

As a vibrant democracy entering into the 21st century, initially, India’s rise as an emerging regional power was conditioned by its complex neighbourhood geopolitics. The involvement of the US and its allies in this complexity was evident since before the end of the Cold War.

India's stance of non-alignment and its dependency on the USSR and then post-war Russia for defence equipment and on the Middle East for oil did not help it in maintaining a cruising rise for the first decade of the 21st century in comparison to China as its counterpart in the region. The great recession in 2008 somewhat weakened the US hold in the global south. In 2012, Vladimir Putin became Russian president and in 2013, Xi-Jinping came to power in China. These leaders took a strong anti-US and anti-Europe approach in their policies and projections. The situation made it somewhat easy for the newly elected majority government led by Narendra Modi in India, to strengthen its position in South Asia. Although the changes in global leadership were not favouring India's growth prospects intentionally, they certainly made India a more visible and eligible candidate for leading the region. In 2014, the Indian Prime Minister committed to India's regional rise, said that "India seeks to position itself in a leading role rather than just a balancing force globally" (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). The evolving and expressive foreign policy mounted on robust economic growth and strengthening defence capabilities have made India a proactive and multi-aligned regional force (Tellis, 2016). Its 'celebrated' participation and roles in BRICS, QUAD, SCO, G7 and G20 along with its energetic relationship with the US President Trump has presented India among the small Asian powers as a leader that can bring balance between East and the West (Upadhyay, 2022). On top of that, the resolve displayed by India in resisting pressure from the US and its allied Western powers on its purchase of the Russian Missile Defence System S-400 has added another dimension to its regional image (Ali Khan, 2019). The same image has also been reflected in India's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Apart from its balanced diplomacy to maintain healthy relationships with all the major economies, India has also played the part of 'the helping hand of Asia'. India has provided timely and active support in various humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations like Operation Maitri for the 2015 Nepal earthquake, operation Samudra Maitri for the 2018 earthquake in Indonesia, Operation Dost for the 2023 earthquake in Turkey and northern Syria and Operation Karuna for 2023 cyclone in Myanmar among many other (Hangzo, 2024). Its famed Vaccine Diplomacy (Vaccine Maitri) during the 2020 Covid pandemic has already received high praise from the global community. Moreover, providing financial assistance to struggling economies like Sri Lanka, providing major assistance to the UN's peacekeeping mission in South Sudan and providing relief to war-tone regions of Africa and the Middle East, have boosted its image among nations of all shapes and sizes.

The small regional countries surrounding India, not only recognizing its growing stature in the global community but also its geographic significance have now compelled them to slowly move towards this new centre of gravity in the region. However, India also can't afford to enjoy its earned position in the region by only seeking to balance the global powers. There is a weight of growing expectations from the small powers that it carries, the expectations that it will eventually have to address. Initially, India has been remarked to be indifferent to its neighbours and South Asian allies. Its sole focus remained to deter China beyond its unresolved territorial disputes, contain Pakistan-sponsored terrorist threats in the northern border region and resolve various internal security issues involving insurgencies in the northeastern region (Kumar, 2023). The situation however changed and Indian leadership realized the compromises they had to make for not devoting necessary diplomatic and non-diplomatic efforts towards its near and extended neighbourhood. As India is set to become the third largest economy in the world by 2030, next only to the US and China, it needs to harmonize and solidify its relations with nations in its regional sphere of influence (S&P Global, 2024).

The expectations of small economies of south, southeast and west Asian and IOR countries from India are interconnected and multifaceted. Most of these expectations have been developed as a result of India's efforts to address various regional issues by taking self-determined initiatives. Based on the interactions between India and these small powers through their respective regional organizations, there are 4 dimensions where these nations seek cooperation and support from India. These are 1) Economic development and financial assistance 2) Connectivity and infrastructure 3) Regional cooperation and diplomatic leadership 4) Regional security and stability.

India represents about 80% of the regional GDP in South Asia. As much as India's economic dominance is clear in the region, its GDP growth trajectory has made it an attractive market and a dependable ally in the region as well (Singh, 2025). India's 'Neighborhood First' policy, 'Look East' policy and its policies in IOR through different initiatives have equally committed to economic development through various means such as FTAs and technology integration in economic institutions like India's UPI. India also has consistently given financial assistance to countries such as Bhutan (the largest recipient), Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Maldives. This has placed India higher in the tally of nations from which small economies can expect economic and development assistance without any clandestine or exploitative agendas. In the past 5 years, India has shown a great deal of commitment and

initiatives in building and improving regional connectivity through dedicated trade routes, ports and road infrastructure projects. Initiatives like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway project (IMTH) and Agreement on Maritime Transport with ASEAN are to name a few (Sharma & Basu, 2024). With regional organizations like BIMSTEC, India has prioritized transport and communication connectivity over all other issues with 267 proposed projects out of which 134 projects in the advanced stage have an estimated value of US\$89.9 billion (Bose et al., 2024).

The Asian countries having close cultural ties with India expect it to lead their voices on the global stage and among the nations where India has a strong negotiating hand. India's feud with Pakistan and recent clash with China have made its proactive participation difficult in certain regional groups like SAARC and SCO (Pant, 2024). The member countries in these groups and others, however, still see India as their partner and patron while negotiating with Western powers. Striking a seasoned balance between the US, its European allies and Russia along with the Middle Eastern powers and Israel amid the ongoing military conflicts has proved India's diplomatic leadership indispensable. India has established its position as a 'net security provider' in IOR by enhancing its maritime and blue water capabilities. Countries in the region and beyond expect India to maintain peace and security given the strategic and economic significance of IOR (Bhattacharya, 2022). Being a member of QUAD and conducting regular joint military exercises with global powers, India has shown its capacity to deter China in IOR and South Asia. India's IOR policy is woven around SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) which emphasises its maritime security vision (Kumar 2024). Moreover, active engagements in peace, security and conflict resolution through diplomacy with ASEAN and IORA countries is another source from where nations have been deriving their expectations.

The Indian Way of Counterbalancing

India's contemporary foreign policy is now largely characterized as a multi-alignment and non-interference strategy, taking a departure from its traditional non-alignment approach. The book by India's current Minister of External Affairs (MEA) Dr. S. Jaishankar titled "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World" encapsulates a gist of India's transforming foreign policy, suggesting that "change is upon us as never before" (Jaishankar, 2020). Amid this transformation, New Delhi has highlighted its diplomatic agenda, to engage the USA, cultivate EU partnership, reassure Russia, manage China, expand the neighbourhood and open channels of support to extended neighbours. Keeping the goal of achieving strategic autonomy in core

and critical areas at the heart of its self-interest-driven foreign policy is now more visible since the second term of the current prime minister of India. As much as India's position is growing in the region, the developed north seeks more camaraderie and synergy with India in its attempt to contain and deter the Russia-China nexus. The US and EU bloc are apprehensive of the idea that without India at their side, the Russia-China partnership will consolidate their strength in the region and dispel their influence in the region for good (Adil, 2024).

India's counterbalancing attempts between these superpower 'nexuses' and 'blocs' are not merely defensive, but have evolved into an interconnected efforts towards achieving synergy through diversity. To that end, India's multi-alignment diplomacy has been utilised to strike a balance between QUAD, BRICS and SCO, which directly advances its core interest of strategic autonomy and strengthens its maritime security. Similarly, its strategic de-hyphenation approach amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has enabled New Delhi to recalibrate its energy security and defence modernization plans. Empirical analysis clearly suggests that India's stance in Russia-Ukraine war often termed as "strategic ambivalence", has worked out to its advantage (Teresa, 2023). The purchase of discounted Russian oil amid the raging Russia-Ukraine war and remaining a silent supporter of Israel's military actions against the Hamas terrorist group in Palestine is proof of India's a bit reformed but largely the same diplomatic stance. The 'bit reformed' part can be witnessed in its clear priorities for its economic and development needs over a "European problem".

It has been reiterated by many scholars that the policy and diplomatic approach of non-alignment or playing all sides works only in certain situations and till certain times (Strydom 2007). It may not go a long way if India keeps it up even though the Western world is fighting for its survival against Russia and China is moving aggressively in response to the fleeting US hegemony in south Asia. However, India seems to be keeping this stance as long as possible since it has proven beneficial in fueling its developing and fast-growing economy by acquiring trade and other advantages from both worlds. The credibility amassed from such diplomatic balancing to prioritize its own national interests, has been liquidated by India for regional integration. One of the key example of such attempt is to bring BIMSTEC and the SAGAR initiative to instill stability in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which is critical to many Southeast Asian nations.

The expectations that the US and EU bloc maintain from India have their source in India's potential to deter Russian and Chinese dominance in the region. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine

war and the growing possibility of the Chinese invasion of Taiwan only fuel those expectations. These western expectations from India are quite different from the expectations of the remaining global south (except China and Pakistan). In the struggle of taking sides, India's counterbalancing act becomes clear in this statement of its External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar in 2022, "India is entitled to have its side" (Bajpae, 2023). This statement breaks the notion that by moving away from China (post-2020 Galwan clash), India automatically moves towards the West. The ingenious idea that India can have its side is a matter of great comfort and encouragement to all the small economies in the region and beyond. In other words, India charting its own strategic path is reassuring and empowering for smaller regional economies.

China adds another dimension to India's way of counterbalancing expectations between global and regional powers. Its coercive approach in the South China Sea and its infamous 'debt-trap policy' have developed distaste among small regional economies towards receiving economic and financial aid from China (Gordon, 2023). Since India and China already have serious border disputes which even erupted in a violent clash in 2021 claiming the lives of many soldiers on both sides, these policies of China in the South China Sea are the reason India has been inviting Western engagements in the region in the form of QUAD, bilateral engagements like LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA and 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue and multilateral framework engagements like Malabar and AUSINDEX Naval Exercises (Zajaczkowski 2021). In the abstract, India has become a bridge between developed western economies and small developing Asian economies which are diverging away from China.

India's interconnectedness with small Asian economies and even medium and large economies like Indonesia, Japan and China has a unique cultural and civilizational dimension too (Admin, 2021). This dimension sets it apart from all the Western powers who have largely been able to interact on functional and diplomatic foundations only. This dimension creates a sense of trust and social connectivity which goes a long way than any economic and financial aid from India. This may be the reason that many regional organizations where India is an active member have 'cultural and social engagement enhancement' as one of their objectives and founding principles.

India's way of counterbalancing is a convergence of its multilateral and multidimensional engagements with all the stakeholders in furthering the agenda of a peaceful and prosperous

region, the core concept of which remained as achieving strategic autonomy and offering the region a stable and trustable leadership.

The current outlook of India as a multi-aligned emerging power of the global south still remains a strategic asset in this volatile world order. The ability that India has acquired over the years, to remain aligned with everyone, without belonging to anyone, has consistently served its core interests. However, as global geopolitics is gradually becoming transactional, this approach of staying in everyone's good books, will be tested and sacrifices will have to be made. This is evident in the recent US-Iran war where India could not align itself strategically enough to safeguard its energy interests while bringing the two sides on the table of agreement.

Conclusion

The growing value of emerging regional powers like India in contemporary world order is a clear indication of its long-awaited shift to multipolarity. The division of the global political arena into regional playgrounds has been considered a natural course just like large and complex molecules in our body break into smaller ones to make digestion easy. India, hailed as the largest democracy on the planet stands at a complex and dynamic intersection of this regional 'democratization' of the prevailing world order. Its regional and global ambitions stand on its flexible and evolving approach of counterbalancing multiple forces and stabilising them to harness its national interests. It seems, more regional organizations budding around their respective regional powers, tend to accelerate multipolarization. This hypothesis has shown a great deal of success in India's context. The dimensions of expectations for India as of now are different for different sides and blocs. This, at multiple levels, makes it easy to create a synergy between them. However, it may not remain the same for a long time and once the ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East proliferate to Asia, India may find itself on the sharp side of the stick. To that end, its geostrategic and geoeconomic significance still towers over all the hegemonic agendas thrown at it from all sides. Being the world's most populated and 4th largest economy, it carries a heavy burden to maintain peace and security in the region. The rivalries between the global powers are more prone to escalate into an uncontrollable military conflict now than ever. India trying to create a third side in such fragile times could be a wise and potential move to let the world live a few more years of peace, or it can very well be a miscalculation leading up to the unpleasant consequences.

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