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## 6. The Impact of India's Rise on South Asia

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### **Abstract**

India's rise is reshaping South Asia amid a shifting global order toward multipolarity, and resurgent "civilizational" narratives. The article argues that small and middle powers in South Asia will find non-alignment harder to sustain and may face pressure to choose clearer strategic alignments. It then advances a "Big Four" thesis: in security and emerging technologies (anti-satellite capability, hypersonics, nuclear triad, and demonstrated military autonomy), India increasingly resembles the U.S., China, and Russia more than the UK or France. Economically, India's low per-capita income remains a weakness, but aggregate size, rapid growth, and top-tier military spending strengthen its geopolitical weight. Diplomatically, India's ability to engage rivals simultaneously and conduct global operations and evacuations underscores strategic autonomy. Regional turbulence both complicates cooperation and accelerates India's primacy by creating governance vacuums that invite external influence.

**Keywords:** India's Rise, Multipolarity, Strategic Autonomy, Big Four, Regional Instability

### **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, India has emerged as one of the most significant and dynamic forces shaping the trajectory of South Asia. As the region's largest country by population, landmass, and economy, India's transformation has had far-reaching consequences for its neighbors and for the global community. The rise of India is not merely an economic story, though its economic expansion is often the most visible

marker of its ascent. It is also a political, cultural, and strategic phenomenon that has redefined how South Asia interacts with itself and with the wider world. This transformation is marked by a growing confidence in India's national identity, its aspirations to play a larger role on the international stage, and its ability to influence regional affairs in ways that were unimaginable only a few decades ago.

South Asia has historically been a region of immense diversity, home to multiple civilizations, religions, and linguistic traditions. For much of its modern history, it has also been a region marked by political fragmentation, economic challenges, and periodic conflict. Against this backdrop, India's rise represents a shift toward greater regional coherence and influence, as the country's growing capacities position it as a central actor in shaping the region's future. Whether in trade, diplomacy, security, or culture, India's expanding footprint is creating new opportunities for collaboration but also new pressures on smaller states to adjust to its leadership.

India's ascent is often viewed as part of a broader trend of rising powers from the Global South seeking to reshape international norms and institutions. Yet the South Asian context is unique. The countries of the region share deep historical ties with India, and their economies, cultures, and security concerns are closely interlinked. As India becomes more assertive in projecting its vision for the region, questions arise about how this will affect existing power balances, bilateral relationships, and the prospects for regional integration. Will India's rise lead to a more prosperous and stable South Asia, or will it generate new tensions and rivalries?

At the same time, India's growing global presence has altered how the world engages with South Asia. International powers increasingly view the region through the prism of India's strategic and economic relevance, which can amplify India's leverage but also place greater responsibility on its shoulders. For neighboring countries, this shift brings both opportunities for partnership and concerns about autonomy. The interplay between India's domestic priorities, regional ambitions, and global expectations will continue to shape the South Asian landscape for years to come.

This paper explores the rise of India and its multifaceted impact on South Asia. By examining the broad trends underpinning India's emergence and the ripple effects across its neighborhood, the discussion seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges that

lie ahead. The rise of India is not an isolated development but a regional and global event, and its implications reach far beyond its borders.

The structure of this analysis is three tiered – (i) First, the paper provides a quick overview of the global geopolitical landscape (ii) Second, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of India's rise and (iii) Third, the paper summarizes the potential impact on South Asia.

## 1. The Changing Landscape

Most experts acknowledge that the world order is changing, especially with the Trump presidency creating so much uncertainty in what was considered a rock-solid global system.

1. "Values" vs "Value" - The Trump administration represents a significant departure from the norms of U.S. foreign policy. Rather than upholding the liberal international order based on institutions and collective security, President Trump has championed a more transactional and unilateral approach.<sup>1</sup>

"America First" is a guiding mantra, with the administration questioning longstanding alliances like NATO<sup>2</sup>, engaging in a Tariff war with long-term allies like Canada<sup>3</sup>, wanting chokepoints like the Panama Canal under American control<sup>4</sup>, and pushing for a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire agreement<sup>5</sup>. Some argue

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<sup>1</sup> Ravi Agrawal, "Trump is Ushering In A More Transactional World" *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2025 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/07/trump-transactional-global-system-us-allies-markets-tariffs/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>2</sup> "Trump Casts Doubt On Willingness To Defend Nato Allies If They Don't Pay", *The Guardian*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Buchwald, "Trump is Ending Trade Talks with Canada", *CNN*, 27 June 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/27/business/trump-breaks-off-canada-trade-talks> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Berry, "Trump's Plan for the Panama Canal", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 April 2025 <https://www.cfr.org/blog/presidents-inbox-recap-trumps-plan-panama-canal> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>5</sup> David Brennan, Patrick Reeve, and Hannah Demissie, "Trump, Vance To Meet Virtually With Zelenskyy Ahead of Putin Summit", *ABC News*, 13 August 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/zelenskyy-putin-preparing-end-war-despite-trump-summit/story?id=124567946> (accessed 15 December 2025).

that this has eroded trust in American leadership and signalled to the world that the U.S. was now primarily motivated by immediate national gains rather than the stewardship of a global order.

While this approach resonated with domestic constituencies weary of costly foreign entanglements, it contributed to a perception of U.S. retrenchment and spurred other powers to think they might fill the vacuum. It also turns the global economic environment from one of “economic policy” to “economic statecraft”, where economic decision-making is driven by strategic rather than purely economic factors.<sup>6</sup>

For South Asia, a transactional world order represents a golden opportunity if there is a clear-cut strategic alignment, but a major threat if non-alignment and balancing acts continue to be the norm. A transactional world order is based on “value” (i.e the benefits you bring to the partnership) and not “values” (i.e your belief system and ideology).

South Asia might need to be aligned to either the USA or India or China to protect itself from the inevitable competitions that will arise from such a system. Simply trying to be friends with everybody will no longer be viable in a structure where every nation will be required to prove its own worth before expecting reciprocity.

2. The Rise of Multipolarity - Simultaneously, the world is witnessing a clear rise in multipolarity.

The post-Cold War illusion of a unipolar world, with the U.S. as the uncontested hegemon, is giving way to a geopolitical landscape marked by competing regional powers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Every, “US Economic Statecraft: Days of Future Past”, *RaboResearch*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.rabobank.com/knowledge/q011465341-global-strategy-us-economic-statecraft-days-of-future-past> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Liu Lingling, “The Transition to A Multipolar World An Inevitable Reality”, *Global Times*, 23 February 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202502/1328926.shtml> (accessed 15 December 2025).

China is growing militarily assertive in the South China Sea<sup>8</sup>, paired with its emergence as one of the biggest trade partners of nearly every country in the world. Russia is projecting influence across Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, using both conventional military force and hybrid tactics.<sup>9</sup>

In parallel, regional powers like India, Turkey, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Iran are asserting their own interests, contributing to a diffusion of power. These regional actors are often motivated by their historical spheres of influence and local imperatives, further complicating global alliances.

For South Asian nations, the lesson here is once again quite clear, that trying to stage a balancing act would do much more harm than good. While non-alignment was certainly a logical choice in a bipolar or unipolar world, where there were clear positions to pick and clear lines in the sand to be drawn, it will not be a viable strategy in a nebulous world of multipolarity, where smaller nations are more likely to become collateral damage if they refuse to pick a side.

3. Return to a Civilizational World - Overlaying this multipolar landscape is the resurgence of civilizational narratives in shaping security dynamics.<sup>10</sup> The global order is becoming less defined by universalist ideals and more by particularistic cultural and historical identities.

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<sup>8</sup> "China's Military Conducts Patrols in South China Sea, warns Philippines", *Reuters*, 15 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-military-conducts-patrols-south-china-sea-warns-philippines-2025-06-15/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Emily Ferris, "Beyond Ukraine: Russia's Foreign Policy Challenges in 2025", *Royal United Service Institute*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/beyond-ukraine-russias-foreign-policy-challenges-2025> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Nils Gilman, "Samuel Huntington Is Getting His Revenge", *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/21/samuel-huntington-fukuyama-clash-of-civilizations/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

Leaders such as China's Xi Jinping<sup>11</sup>, Russia's Vladimir Putin<sup>12</sup>, and India's Narendra Modi<sup>13</sup> frequently invoke their nations' civilizational legacies to justify domestic policies and assert geopolitical interests. President's Trump rhetoric could just as easily be seen as touting American civilizational interests.

These narratives frame conflicts not merely as disputes over territory or resources but as contests between competing ways of life and value systems. For example, Russia's actions in Ukraine are underpinned by a rhetoric of defending "Russian civilization" against Western encroachment, while China's emphasis on its own civilizational identity influences its strategic posture in East Asia. Such civilizational framings contribute to an international environment where security concerns are increasingly linked to identity and culture, complicating the prospects for universal norms or consensus-driven conflict resolution.

Recent conflicts between India-Pakistan<sup>14</sup>, Iran-Israel<sup>15</sup> and even Thailand-Cambodia<sup>16</sup> only confirm this hypothesis, as the world witnesses civilizational questions becoming the drivers of conflict.

South Asian nations must consider whom their ideal partner could be in a world order like this, particularly given the deep cultural and civilizational ties that they all share with India. If we are entering

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<sup>11</sup> "Xi Stresses Building Modern Chinese Civilization", *State Council, the Peoples's Republic of China*, 2 June 2023, [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202306/02/content\\_WS6479f528c6d0868f4e8dc96b.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202306/02/content_WS6479f528c6d0868f4e8dc96b.html) (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, "Scientific Putinism: Shaping Official Ideology in Russia", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 21, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/11/scientific-putinism-shaping-official-ideology-in-russia?lang=en> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Gordan, "India's Techno-Civilizational Vision", *The Diplomat*, 12 August 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/indias-techno-civilizational-vision/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Briskey, "The History of Conflict Between Pakistan and India", *Murdoch University*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.murdoch.edu.au/news/articles/the-history-of-conflict-between-pakistan-and-india> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>15</sup> Haim Ben Yakov, "From Cyrus to Khamenei: Four Thousand Years of Persian-Jewish Relations", *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/culture/article-858842> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "The Roots of the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict", *The Diplomat*, 28 July 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/the-roots-of-the-thailand-cambodia-border-conflict/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

an era of deep-seated civilizational worldviews, the case for closer cooperation with India becomes self-evident, given the natural synergy of historical narratives.

## 2. From Big Five to Big Four? – Rethinking Geopolitical Power<sup>17</sup>

The permanent members of the UN Security Council – Russia, USA, UK, France and China – have often been referred to as the five most powerful nations in the world. A phrase commonly used is the “Big Five”<sup>18</sup>, thanks to their veto powers extending an ironclad grip over the United Nations, and consequently, over the fundamental contours of world politics.<sup>19</sup>

This section seeks to probe the “Big Five” assumption a little further. More specifically, it seeks to juxtapose the growing role of India with the UK and France, whose ability to shape world affairs seems diminished from what it once was. The article explores three macro areas – security, economy and diplomacy – where India’s trajectory appears to contrast with that of the UK and France. So much so, that it seems like the “Big Five” classification has already become the “Big Four” for all practical purposes. This assessment will try to be as objective as possible, without veering into either propaganda or flippant dismissal.

## 3. Security

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<sup>17</sup> The discussions from this paragraph overlap with ilanthan Niruthan, “From Big Five to Big Four? – Rethinking Geopolitical Power”, *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 11 December 2024, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/from-big-five-to-big-four-rethinking-geopolitical-power> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel. “The Big Five: Clinging to Power.” *Iwallerstein.com*, 1 February 2019, <https://iwallerstein.com/the-big-five-clinging-to-power/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Oona Hathway and Stewart Patrick. “Can the UN Security Council Still Help Keep the Peace? Reassessing Its Role, Relevance, and Potential for Reform.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 July 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/07/can-un-security-council-still-help-keep-the-peace?lang=en> (accessed 15 December 2025).

Despite the rising importance of economics and diplomacy, it is often pointed out that the primary determinant of geopolitical power remains old fashioned military might.<sup>20</sup> In new military domains like space warfare, the Big Five to Big Four transition is already complete. For instance, the only four countries that have successfully conducted anti-satellite missile tests are the USA, Russia, China and India.<sup>21</sup> The United States concluded the Bold Orion project in 1959, Russia had its first “space kamikaze” test in 1968, China successfully struck the FY-1C weather satellite in 2007, and India joined the fray in 2019.<sup>22</sup> The UK and France are yet to demonstrate this capability, with no successful missile tests on record.

While this might not seem like much at a first glance, it must be remembered that space warfare will soon become one of the most important domains of security competition shaping world power. Daily life as we know it would be impossible if our satellites were neutralized – every regular application from communication to GPS to online banking today relies on some kind of space-based infrastructure.<sup>23</sup> The next world war will extend to outer space as well, if the belligerents are intent on destroying each other with the vehemence often seen in global conflicts. The nations which have an edge in this department are thus poised to dominate the next world war, whenever it comes. One could even say missile technology in general has moved to a Big Four dynamic, where the USA, Russia, China and India already have a recurring pattern of developing successful end-products before the rest. For example, there has been a lot of debate over the effectiveness of hypersonic missiles<sup>24</sup>, but there is no denying that it is critical for power projection, such as the sensationalist hype around

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<sup>20</sup> Allison Fedirka, “Hard Power is Still King” *Geopolitical Futures*, 20 July 2017 <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/hard-power-still-king/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Niruthan, “From Big Five to Big Four?”.

<sup>22</sup> Max Polyakov, “Satellite Combat: The History of Space Weapons”, *Max Polyakov Space News*, 1 May 2024, <https://maxpolyakov.com/satellite-combat-the-history-of-space-weapons/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>23</sup> Niruthan, “From Big Five to Big Four?”.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Graceffo, “Hypersonic Weapons: Paradigm Shift or Empty Hype?” *Geopolitical Monitor*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-hypersonic-weapons/> (accessed 15 December 2025).



whether Iran armed Houthi rebels with hypersonic missiles.<sup>25</sup> Here too, India successfully tested hypersonic missiles as far back as 2019 to join the elite club<sup>26</sup>, while France caught up only in 2023 with the V-MAX<sup>27</sup>, Japan tested the HGVP in 2024<sup>28</sup> and the UK is yet to complete development.<sup>29</sup> In new domains of technology, power is determined by who gets there first, and it is interesting to note that the first four to typically get there are not the five permanent members.

In older areas like nuclear power, India has already caught up to the Big Five. In August 2016, India commissioned the INS Arihant, its first nuclear submarine, officially joining the Big Five with Nuclear Triad (the ability to launch nuclear strikes from land, sea and air) capabilities.<sup>30</sup> Once again, this is no small matter, given the persisting importance of nuclear weaponry. What gives India a clear edge over the UK and France here, is the military autonomy it possesses in the use of nuclear weapons.

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<sup>25</sup> Emily Milliken, "Do the Houthis really have a Hypersonic Missile?", *Atlantic Council*, 24 September, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/yemen-iran-houthis-hypersonic-missile-israel/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>26</sup> Prateek Tripathi, "How Hypersonic Weapons are redefining Warfare", *Observer Research Foundation*, 2 May 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-hypersonic-weapons-are-redefining-warfare> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Elise Vincent, "Test firing of V-MAX brings France into Exclusive Club of Countries with Hypersonic Missiles", *Le Monde*, 28 June 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/06/28/test-firing-of-v-max-brings-france-into-exclusive-club-of-countries-with-hypersonic-missiles\\_6038696\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/06/28/test-firing-of-v-max-brings-france-into-exclusive-club-of-countries-with-hypersonic-missiles_6038696_4.html) (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Arthur, "Japan reveals Test Launch of its Hypersonic Strike Missile Program", *Defense News*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2024/07/10/japan-reveals-test-launch-of-its-hypersonic-strike-missile-program/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>29</sup> William Freer, "Britain's Hypersonic Challenge: Strategic Opportunities and Risks", *Council on Geostrategy*, 10 September 2024. <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/britains-hypersonic-challenge-strategic-opportunities-and-risks/#:~:text=Britain%20plans%20to%20develop%20a,too%20much%20with%20too%20little> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Keshav Padmanabhan, "Navy gets Second Nuclear-Powered Submarine. INS Arighaat boosts India's Nuclear Triad", *The Print*, 29 August 2024, <https://theprint.in/defence/navy-gets-second-nuclear-powered-submarine-ins-arighaat-boosts-indias-nuclear-triad/2244452/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

It is quite difficult to believe either the UK or France could nuclearize a conflict without operating within the NATO framework or without consultation with Washington.<sup>31</sup> This is not necessarily a bad thing for them, belonging to an alliance brings many benefits. However, the very nature of a treaty alliance entails sacrificing some strategic autonomy for the collective interest. India does not have the luxury of a treaty alliance, but it does enjoy complete autonomy in how it exercises nuclear power. And despite affirming commitment to a No First Strike policy<sup>32</sup>, there is no senior partner or collective interest preventing India from nuclearizing a conflict if it chose to rethink that position.

On the question of security autonomy itself, India has demonstrated a near-tectonic shift in its approach to geopolitics under the Modi regime. While cross-border retaliations were virtually unheard of in India before 2014, a number of military operations have been launched since, demonstrating not only autonomy but the political will to exercise military power.

In 2015 and 2016, India conducted cross-border strikes into Myanmar, in retaliation to Indian troops ambushed and murdered by communist insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland.<sup>33</sup> In 2019, India conducted the Balakot operation – unprecedented airstrikes into Pakistani territory, in response to the Pulwama attack which killed nearly 50 Indian security personnel. Even more strikingly, we are currently witnessing the Galwan valley standoff between India and China, which has already seen numerous skirmishes between the two nations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Tisdall, "A failing British Nuclear Arsenal Reliant on the Goodwill of Donald Trump? It's a terrifying Thought", *The Guardian*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/24/failing-british-nuclear-arsenal-reliant-on-the-goodwill-of-donald-rump-is-terrifying-thought> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Debalina Ghoshal, "India's New Submarine Strengthens 'No First Use' Doctrine", *Defense.info*, 9 September 2024, <https://defense.info/global-dynamics/2024/09/indias-new-submarine-strengthens-no-first-use-doctrine/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, "India: Lessons from 'Surgical Strikes' in Myanmar", *Mantraya Special Report*, 3 October, 2016, <https://miss.org.in/india-lessons-from-surgical-strikes-in-myanmar/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>34</sup> Yogesh Joshi, "Five Years of Balakot: A New Nuclear South Asia", *ISAS Briefs*, 16 February 2024, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/five-years-of-balakot-a-new-nuclear-south-asia/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

None of this means India should simply be placed in a special category that has erstwhile been reserved for the Big Five. What it does mean though, is that India is BOTH a nuclear and space power, which also happens to enjoy a proven track record of military autonomy and tech innovation. Only the USA, Russia and China can make a similar claim.

#### 4. Economy

The economy is probably the weakest link in the “Big Four” thesis, given India’s per capita income of less than 3,000 USD. To put this in perspective, the UK and France have a per capita income of around 50,000 USD, which showcases the vast gulf which still exists.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this glaring hole however, other macro data clearly shows how the momentum is swinging in India’s favor. India’s overall economy has surpassed the Three Trillion mark, placing it firmly ahead of both the UK and France (neither of whom have breached Three Trillion yet). As some experts have noted, it took India 16 to 17 years after liberalization to hit the One Trillion mark, a further seven years to hit Two Trillion, another seven (despite Covid) to get to Three Trillion in 2021 and is projected by some to reach Four Trillion by 2025<sup>36</sup>, a sequence which would firmly place it as the third largest economy after the USA and China. This is certainly a very realistic target, given the IMF’s assessment that India is “easily” the fastest growing large economy in the world today.<sup>37</sup>

It is also important to note that, while per capita income is crucial to measure prosperity, it is not necessarily an indicator of geopolitical power. After all, China’s per capita income is only around

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<sup>35</sup> International Monetary Fund, “GDP per Capita, Current Prices”, 2024. <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/IND> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>36</sup> Nan Tian, et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure 2023”, *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, April 2024. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404\\_fs\\_milex\\_2023.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf) (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>37</sup> All India Management, “India will become \$5 Trillion Economy by 2024 – Sanjiv Sanyal at #AIMCNMC”, Youtube, 20 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8YaMjeWI94> (accessed 15 December 2025).

13,000 USD, far behind most nations in the Western alliance, but Beijing is clearly second only to Washington on the world stage.<sup>38</sup>

A far clearer economic indicator of power, is the amount a nation is willing to invest in military expenditure. Here too, there is already a clear Big Four now, with the USA, China, Russia and India holding the top spots in military spending, accounting for about 57% of global military spending together.<sup>39</sup>

Once again, this does not mean that the article's hypothesis is confirmed. It is merely yet another sign that the argument has some merit.

## 5. Diplomacy

Lastly, there has been a major shift in the realm of global diplomacy, which suggests that India's influence is now on a much higher level than the UK or France individually. India's emerging position as a "global swing state"<sup>40</sup> affords it a level of international engagement that few, not even the established major powers, are capable of. For example, India is one of the few major powers to have a longstanding positive relationship with both Sunni Saudi Arabia<sup>41</sup> and Shia Iran<sup>42</sup>. And if that was not complex enough, India also enjoys a great friendship with Israel.<sup>43</sup> One would be hard pressed to find another country with the same level of trilateral outreach in the Middle East.

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<sup>38</sup> Shreyashi Sanyal, "India 'easily' the Fastest Growing Economy, IMF Executive Director says, as GDP Growth blows Past Estimates", *CNBC*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/03/01/india-easily-fastest-growing-economy-imf-director-says-as-gdp-growth-soars.html>

<sup>39</sup> International Monetary Fund, "GDP per capita, Current Prices", 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Brahma Chellaney, "The Global Swing State", *Stage and Statecraft*, 3 March 2024, <https://chellaney.net/2024/03/03/the-global-swing-state/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>41</sup> Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, "India and Saudi Arabia: A Thriving Partnership Towards a Promising Future", *Observer Research Foundation*, 23 February 2024, <https://orfme.org/expert-speak/india-and-saudi-arabia-a-thriving-partnership-towards-a-promising-future/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>42</sup> Rajeev Agarwal, "The Role of Iran in India's Strategic Outreach in West Asia", *Observer Research Foundation*, 14 August 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-role-of-iran-in-india-s-strategic-outreach-in-west-asia> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>43</sup> Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, "India Outs Its Israel Affair", *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 27 December 2023,

This ability to remain autonomous was emphasized even further this year, with Indian Prime Minister Modi visiting Russia in July<sup>44</sup> and Ukraine in August<sup>45</sup>, another feat very few nations would have been capable of. Even India's refusal to castigate Russia at the behest of its Western allies turned into a strength rather than a weakness, with international dignitaries pouring into New Delhi after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, from Sergei Lavrov<sup>46</sup> to Elizabeth Truss<sup>47</sup> to Wang Yi<sup>48</sup> all being hosted in the course of a single week.

When studying the two conflict theatres in the media spotlight today – Eastern Europe and the Middle East, one sees that nations that are pro-Israel typically tend to be pro-Ukraine, given their affinity to the US-led Western alliance. Only a handful of nations can be described as being both pro-Israel and pro-Russia, pursuing a totally independent geopolitical direction suited to their specific interest, and India is one of them. France and the UK on the other hand, have been unable to make any independent breakthroughs in these conflicts, even with traditional allies like Israel.<sup>49</sup>

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<https://www.freiheit.org/south-asia/india-outs-its-israel-affair> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>44</sup> Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Modi's balancing act as he meets Putin in Moscow", *BBC News*, 9 July 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpd91pe5r9go> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>45</sup> Tanika Godbole, "Why is India's Modi visiting Ukraine after Russia?", *DW News*, 23 August 2024 <https://www.dw.com/en/india-narendra-modi-ukraine-russia/a-69992108> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>46</sup> Murali Krishnan, "Lavrov visits India with US Relations at a Crossroads", *DW News*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/sergey-lavrov-visits-india-with-us-relations-at-a-crossroads/a-61329983> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Liz Truss's India visit made Awkward by Presence of Russian Counterpart", *The Guardian*, 30 March 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/mar/30/liz-truss-india-visit-narendra-modi-russia-sergei-lavrov> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>48</sup> Ananth Krishnan, "Wang Yi comes to India", *The Hindu*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-view-from-india-march-28-2022/article65267472.ece> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>49</sup> Philippe Ricard, "Macron-Netanyahu Tensions escalate after French President's comments on the Creation of Israel", *Le Monde*, 16 October 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/16/macron-netanyahu-tensions-escalate-after-french-president-s-comments-on-the-creation-of-israel\\_6729542\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/16/macron-netanyahu-tensions-escalate-after-french-president-s-comments-on-the-creation-of-israel_6729542_4.html) (accessed 15 December 2025).

The most important consequence of this autonomy however, is India's direct engagement with global security issues. This was most notably heralded earlier this year with the liberation of the MV Ruen, a bulk carrier that had been hijacked and turned into a 'mother ship' by Somalian pirates. The operation involved drones, naval destroyers, surveillance jets and marine commandos who were flown over 1,500 miles to be airdropped in for the attack.<sup>50</sup> For India to successfully carry out military operations near the Horn of Africa, and to be even more active than the Chinese navy (despite them having a base in Djibouti)<sup>51</sup> is a reminder of the extent to which New Delhi is gearing to flex on the world stage.

Wider diplomatic outreach has also resulted in the ability to safeguard Indian citizens around the world. In the post-pandemic world alone, India has managed to use its diplomatic connections to conduct rescue operations of Indians stranded in nearly every warzone. From Operation Devi Shakti in Afghanistan,<sup>52</sup> to Operation Ganga in Ukraine,<sup>53</sup> to Operation Kaveri in Sudan,<sup>54</sup> to Operation Ajay in Israel,<sup>55</sup> hardly a conflict has gone by without the Indian government actively deploying its diplomatic resources for humanitarian operations.

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<sup>50</sup> Brad Lendon, "Pirate Ship capture Showcases India's World-class Special Forces", *CNN World*, 19 March 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/19/india/india-pirate-ship-capture-intl-hnk-ml/index.html> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>51</sup> Michael Tanchum, "China's New Military Base in Africa: What it means for Europe and America," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 December 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>52</sup> Tulika Tandon, "What is Operation Dev Shakti?", *Jagran Josh*, 25 August 2021, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/what-is-operation-dev-shakti-1629875392-1> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Tanika Godbole, "Was India's Rescue Effort in Ukraine a Success?", *DW News*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-crisis-how-successful-were-indias-repatriation-efforts/a-61099021> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>54</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, "India launches Operation Kaveri to evacuate Stranded Citizens from War-hit Sudan", *The Hindu*, 25 April 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-launches-operation-kaveri-to-evacuate-stranded-citizens-from-war-hit-sudan/article66773499.ece> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>55</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, "'Operation Ajay' set to evacuate Indian Nationals from Israel", *The Hindu*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-launch-operation-ajay-to-evacuate-nationals-from-israel/article67409408.ece> (accessed 15 December 2025).

Finally, India's autonomy is equally evident on a macro scale. New Delhi is an active member of both the Quad<sup>56</sup> and BRICS<sup>57</sup>, despite the two having seemingly contradictory goals. One is seen as a US-led alliance to counter Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific, while the latter is seen as an active attempt to counter American dominance with an alternate system. While this might seem contradictory to most nations, it neatly fits into everything this analysis has demonstrated so far - that India's positioning is based on India's unique geopolitical interests, rather than the behest of larger partners. Neither the UK nor France have this luxury, calling into question their true status as a world power.

## 6. Is the Big Five Confirmed?

It is thus quite clear that, on a wide spectrum of issues, India has showcased capabilities we would typically attribute only to highly influential global actors. It is also demonstrable that in all three key areas, India now holds the edge over the UK and France more often than not.

An argument could be made that the global powers should now be referred to as the "Big Six", with India added to the list, while also allowing the UK and France to stay. However, this beats the entire purpose of using such categories in International Relations. The reason we use categories and labels is to improve our understanding of the world, not to muddle it. The UK and France, with their lack of strategic autonomy and sluggishness to acquire new military technology, cannot be placed on the same level as India simply because of their veto power at the UN (an institution already at risk of losing its credibility if the veto system is not reformed)<sup>58</sup> or their historical legacies.

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<sup>56</sup> Shruthi Pandalai, "The Quad Is Quietly Adapting Methods of Security Cooperation", *South Asian Voices*, 14 October 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-n-quad-security-cooperation-10-14-2024/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>57</sup> Mariel Ferragamo, "What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 October 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>58</sup> Vesselin Popovski, "Revising the United Nations Charter", *Stimson.org*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/revising-the-united-nations-charter/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

There was certainly a time when the Big Five classification made logical sense, but using the UN as a measure of global power is no longer tenable. A number of global issues from Palestine<sup>59</sup> to Kashmir<sup>60</sup> have lingered at the UN for over 75 years and nothing has come from it. Nor are the Big Five the only nuclear powers anymore. There are no “elite categories” the UK and France belong to. Thus, categorizing them on the same tier as the USA, Russia, China and India, only creates confusion, not clarity.

These Four, the new Big Four, are now on a league of their own, with a proven record of acquiring critical military hardware before anyone else and being in control of their own destinies. And as this article has attempted to show, even those who do not subscribe to such a view, must consider the argument seriously to understand modern geopolitical power.

## 7. The Turbulence of South Asia

Political instability across Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in recent years has created a volatile South Asian neighborhood that both complicates and — paradoxically — accelerates India's regional rise. Nepal has seen rapid government turnover and fragile coalitions; Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's frequent coalition-building and multiple governments since 2008 illustrate chronic instability that disrupts policymaking and economic planning.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Nasim Ahmed, “Remembering Resolution 181 calling for the Partition of Palestine”, *Middle East Monitor*, 29 November 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211129-remembering-resolution-181-calling-for-the-partition-of-palestine/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>60</sup> Sourav Roy Barman, “Taking Kashmir to UN, 1948 Ceasefire with Pakistan — Amit Shah lists ‘Nehru's historic blunders’ in LS”, *The Print*, 6 December 2023, <https://theprint.in/india/taking-kashmir-to-un-1948-ceasefire-with-pakistan-amit-shah-lists-nehrus-historic-blunders-in-ls/1874825/> (accessed 15 December 2025).

<sup>61</sup> Gopal Sharma, “Nepal PM wins Parliamentary Vote of Confidence, Third in 14 Months,” *Reuters*, 13 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nepal-pm-wins-parliamentary-vote-confidence-third-14-months-2024-03-13/> (accessed 15 December 2025).



Pakistan's politics have been marked by dramatic upheaval since 2022: the removal of Imran Khan via a no-confidence vote, large nationwide protests, arrests and mass sentencing of opposition supporters, and ongoing tensions between civilian leaders and the military, all of which have deepened uncertainty in Islamabad.

In Bangladesh, elections and mass protests in recent years have been accompanied by violent clashes, large-scale arrests and concerns from rights groups about shrinking civic space — trends that have raised questions about democratic resilience and long-term social stability. Sri Lanka experienced an acute crisis in 2022 when an economic collapse triggered mass protests, mass resignations from the cabinet and the flight of the president, leaving the country dependent on a lengthy IMF program and fragile recovery efforts.

These crises matter for India in two linked ways. First, political instability in neighboring capitals creates governance vacuums that reduce coordination on trade, connectivity and security initiatives — slowing regional projects that India supports or leads. Second, instability invites intensified external influence: when domestic institutions are weak, major powers and creditors step in with investments or security guarantees, complicating India's ability to shape outcomes in its near abroad. Sri Lanka's debt talks and shifting investment patterns during its crisis are an example.

## **8. Conclusion**

The rise of India is one of the most consequential developments of the twenty-first century, not only for South Asia but also for the world at large. This paper has sought to highlight the multiple dimensions of India's emergence and its implications for the region that lies most directly within its orbit. While the precise trajectory of India's rise continues to unfold, three broad insights emerge from the discussion. First, India is undoubtedly among the most powerful nations in the world today, positioned just behind the United States, China, and Russia in terms of its strategic weight and influence. Second, for South Asia, this rise can be understood either as a blessing or a curse, depending on how its neighbours choose to engage with India. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the ultimate impact of India's ascent

on South Asia will depend far more on how the region responds to this new reality than on India's own ambitions alone.

India's stature today is the product of a unique combination of demographic strength, economic growth, cultural depth, and strategic relevance. While it does not yet rival the United States or China in sheer material capacity, its trajectory places it firmly in the ranks of the most influential global actors. In this respect, South Asia finds itself in the unusual position of being home to a state whose influence extends far beyond the region, while simultaneously remaining deeply intertwined with the futures of its smaller neighbours. Few regions of the world have experienced such a dynamic, where one country's rise carries the potential to redefine not only the internal balance of power but also the terms of the region's engagement with the rest of the world.

For South Asian countries, India's rise can be interpreted in two divergent ways. On one hand, it can be seen as an opportunity: the presence of a powerful neighbour offers the possibility of economic integration, improved connectivity, and greater visibility on the global stage. India's markets, infrastructure projects, and growing technological capacities could help elevate the prosperity of the entire region if harnessed through cooperative frameworks. On the other hand, India's ascent may be perceived as a threat to sovereignty, autonomy, and balance. Concerns over disproportionate influence, unequal partnerships, or dominance in security and economic affairs could foster resistance rather than cooperation. This dual perception of India as both a potential benefactor and an overbearing neighbour lies at the heart of South Asia's strategic dilemma.

Yet, the ultimate trajectory of these outcomes rests less with India itself than with how South Asia chooses to respond. India's rise is, by now, an irreversible fact of the international system. What remains uncertain is how neighbouring states will interpret and adapt to this shift. Will they view India's ascent as an invitation to strengthen regional integration and collective bargaining power, or will they fall into patterns of rivalry, suspicion, and hedging? The answer to this question will shape not only the stability of South Asia but also its role in global affairs.

This perspective underscores an important truth: while India's rise has been driven by its internal transformations and global ambitions, the story of its impact on South Asia is a regional one.

Smaller states are not merely passive recipients of India's influence. They retain agency in deciding whether to align, resist, or negotiate on their own terms. Their policies, choices, and attitudes will ultimately determine whether India's emergence becomes a catalyst for shared prosperity or a source of fragmentation and tension. In this sense, the dynamics of South Asia are less about India imposing its will and more about the region collectively shaping the terms of engagement with its most powerful member.

In conclusion, India's rise represents both a challenge and an opportunity for South Asia. It signals the arrival of a new era in which the region must grapple with the presence of a near-global power in its midst. The choices that South Asian states make in the years ahead will determine whether this reality becomes a platform for cooperation, growth, and stability, or whether it fosters suspicion, division, and conflict. India's position as a global actor is now established; what remains to be decided is how South Asia, as a region, will navigate and respond to this transformative moment. Ultimately, the future of South Asia will depend less on India's rise itself and more on how the region chooses to engage with it.