

## Editor's Note

# A Turbulent Global Transition and India's Strategic Options

**T**he liberal international order (LIO) has had a short and deeply troubled life-span. Born at the end of the Cold War with the rise of the United States as the dominant power, the LIO was shaped by America and raised great hopes for a long peace, global cooperation and prosperity. Yet, the order is in a terminal crisis today. The rise of Russia and China as challengers to US predominance, the dissipation of the great power consensus that underpinned order in the initial post-Cold War decade, and the simultaneous weakening of American leadership, power and influence are among the principal causes of the current malaise. The liberal international order has tragically failed to fulfill the promise of an end to great power contest and potential wars, and a peaceful and stable global order. This is particularly unfortunate for the developing world, which needs global cooperation, peace and stability for achieving its developmental goals at a time when they are already facing climate change, domestic challenges, and weak financial support from the developed world.

US actions to strengthen its hold over the global order by expanding the ambit of the NATO across East Europe towards Russia, spread liberal values to all other states, and bring about regime change through Colour Revolutions in the ex-Soviet states, have had a three-dimensional impact on the global order. One, it undermined the Partnership for Peace with Russia, and Gorbachev's goal of building a Common European Home that would include Russia, causing distrust in Moscow and the rise of nationalism under Putin. Thus, Russian support for LIO available through the 1990s was lost, conflict in Europe reignited and great power struggle revived. Two, the US and Western support for liberal globalism and democracy promotion, regime change operations and anti-government movements, as well as their active involvement in the Arab Spring led to a series of wars — Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Ukraine that destabilised the world order. The wars not only ravaged these countries, they also weakened and divided the United States politically and economically, and undermined its global influence. Three, as a result of its deepening involvement in the European theatre against Russia, and the wars in the Gulf and the Middle East, it failed to focus on the much bigger challenge of the rise of Chinese Power and its expansionist agenda in continental Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In fact, the US and EU's strategic policies towards Russia and active involvement in the Ukraine war have

(ii) Editor's Note

pushed Moscow to embrace China, enhancing the challenges, the US, the West and Asia face. The rapid rise of China through the 1992-2015 period—before Donald Trump turned around US policy—was also attained with the active cooperation of the US and its Western allies as 'engagement' thrived. It is only since 2016 that the geopolitical, economic and technological contest between the two has become a defining feature of the crisis facing the LIO, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

International institutions—the bedrock of the liberal order—can hardly function under such circumstances. A deeply divided and troubled international system needs diplomatic negotiations among the leading powers and conflict resolution initiatives. In order to recover some of its coherence the world order urgently needs a US détente with Russia. It is also the only way that the war in Ukraine can be diplomatically resolved, peace re-established in Europe, and the Middle East stabilised. But the Biden administration has shown no politico-diplomatic interest or resolve to move in that direction. It is trying to constrain both Russia and China together—an increasingly difficult mission. A new, complex and dangerous Cold War is in the making.

India has set a target of becoming a developed nation by 2047—the centenary of its Independence. It needs a long period of peace and stability in order to achieve its ambitious goals of transformation. It has so far adroitly navigated through the multiple challenges it has faced over the past five years—the lethal impact of the pandemic, ensuring rapid economic recovery and sustaining growth, the military build-up and sudden aggression by China in Galwan in the midst of Covid, and establishing peace in Jammu and Kashmir. It vaccinated its entire population, expanded its food security and welfare coverage for bulk of its people, and stepped up its public investments in infrastructure, focused on self-reliance in critical industries and innovation, and enhanced trade and investment ties with the world. The government is promoting investments on frontier areas of technology such as AI and semiconductors. It is building ties with all the major powers and key regional states – the US, Russia, Japan, Europe, the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the broader Global South, and has stayed away from the great power struggles. Its strategic autonomy and strong partnerships are structured to advance political, economic, technological and security needs. India's participation in the Quad along with the US, Japan and Australia is vital for shaping a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), and India's development of the Chabahar port project in Iran will open up the vital North-South Corridor into Central Asia, Russia and Europe. They add new dimensions to India's growing regional role in promoting connectivity, trade flows and regional geoeconomics.

Over the coming decade India is likely to be a leading power in the Indo-Pacific and Asia, with strong politico-economic and diplomatic ties across the world. Its strong all-round growth will strengthen multipolarity and make India a pillar of stability in a fractured world order. A multipolar world order would need India to play an active and leading role in global institutions that are increasingly dysfunctional, and help build new and relevant ones that would effectively address new age challenges of disorder, great power competition, technological and climate change. The many challenges posed by an expansionist China necessitates that India develop strong economic, technological and military capacities, as also effective diplomatic and military strategies to secure its interests. Even developing close ties with the United States—an important dimension of its balancing strategy in the Indo-Pacific—would require clear vision and diplomatic dexterity. A rising India needs to think through every facet of its opportunities, challenges, and capacities to evolve a grand strategy that secures its present and future in a world order afflicted by multiple crises.

## **In This Issue**

This issue of *National Security* brings together perspectives of leading Indian strategic thinkers on the most pertinent factors affecting the world and how India should prepare itself to brace the near and long term future.

In their opening essay former Vice Chairman NITI Aayog Rajiv Kumar and Ishan Joshi identify six major and simultaneous transitions that the world is undergoing, namely: geopolitical, geoeconomic, technological, geographical, shift of the economic locus away from OECD countries and climate change related developments. They maintain that domestic and global conditions are propitious for India, but emphasise the need of evolving an innovative matrix of policies to make the most of these transitions.

Arguably the most important factor affecting the world today is the inability of the lone but relatively weakened superpower, the US, to sustain the system of international relations that it had built. Arun K. Singh, former Ambassador to the United States, in his essay cites instances of the sub-optimal responses of the United States in the ongoing conflicts; be the calibrated supply of weapons to Ukraine so as not to provoke Russia into escalation or the inability to prevent the widening of the Israel-Hamas standoff or indeed the lack of any robust challenge to Chinese provocations in the Indo-Pacific. This reality and what it portends, needs to be borne in mind by India.

The weaknesses and virtual break-down of the UN system as a result of the great power rivalry, are having catastrophic consequences. In his essay Asoke Mukerji, former Permanent Representative at the UN, highlights the crisis in global governance that

exacerbates the impact of crises especially for countries of the Global South. The lack of a strong political signal from the UN Security Council for an all-of-UN response to the COVID pandemic meant that the WHO could not implement its innovative vaccine initiative to deliver vaccines to the developing countries. The Security Council also failed to ensure necessary actions to implement its resolutions on Afghanistan and Ukraine, and was a mere spectator as crisis unfolded in West Asia. All of these have had an adverse impact on Agenda 2030 adopted by the UN members. Given India's developmental goals and aspirations, which complement those of most countries of the Global South, the country should work with like-minded partners for the strengthening of mechanisms of global governance, beginning with the reform of multilateralism.

In his essay Arvind Gupta, VIF Director, argues that the present state of the world is a result of a liberal international order that went awry. The need of the hour, therefore, is an order that is genuinely democratic. Norms that ought to underpin this new order could gain from values prevalent in civilisational states like India that have preserved the balance between man and nature for centuries. The ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning the world is one family, if imbibed across the world, will lead the way out of the current "polycrisis", he argues.

Highlighting global instability in the present times, D. B. Venkatesh Varma, former Ambassador to Russia, in his essay captures the essence of what states are faced with. He posits that forces that impact national security of states are working in tandem with forces that weaken the ability of states to make sovereign decisions pertaining to critical elements of their well-being. This is compounded by an overarching contestation between the US and China across several domains. He suggests that India's grand strategy in such times be aimed at avoiding critical dependence on leading powers to preserve its autonomy.

The essay by leading military analyst and thinker Gautam Banerjee is a fine-combed analysis of the military aspects of a turbulent world order. He highlights the use of latest lethal technologies in warfare and the collapse of established codes of conduct related to use of force that have implications for the use of military power. The strategic implications of the politics of warfare are explained with an appraisal of five notable wars witnessed since the 1980s. The tactical imperatives of these implications are then spelt out.

The developed and developing countries have seldom been on the same page since the end of World War II. But they were never so divided on existential issues. The essay by India's principal expert on Climate Change, J. R. Bhatt focuses on yet another tussle between the developed and developing countries that is symptomatic of the long-drawn battle lines on the turf of climate change. In March 2024, a large group of developing

countries thwarted an attempt by a small group of countries led by Switzerland to undercut the UN moratoria on Solar Radiation Modification. At stake in this face-off are the potential negative fallouts of untested technologies on natural ecosystems; but more importantly the preservation of existing environmental laws and norms related to global commons.

Finally, in her engrossing book review, economist Purnima M. Gupta reflects on the energy vs. environment conundrum in the Indian context. She argues that while the book *Energy and Environment in India: The Politics of a Chronic Crisis*, by Johannes Urpelainen is a good resource for policy makers who seek to balance the many requirements of a rising India, it underrates the successes of India in these domains. Moreover, it gives a short shrift to the astute understating of the energy-environment nexus displayed by India in international forums and its civilisational predisposition to maintaining the balance between them.

Prof. Sujit Dutta  
Editor, *National Security*