



# Non-Allied Forever: India's Grand Strategy According to Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

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When Chinese aggression intensified along the Sino-Indian border in May last year, many analysts and policymakers wondered whether this crisis would, as the *Financial Times*' Gideon Rachman phrased it, finally push India to “[consider a formal alliance with the United States](#).” After all, China's increased global belligerence of the last several years has threatened both U.S. and Indian interests in significant ways, and the transformation in U.S.-Indian ties that has been underway for some two decades was intended largely to deal with the challenges posed by a rising China. This danger has a special resonance for New Delhi given that an emerging superpower now resides on India's borders for the first time in its millennia-long history.

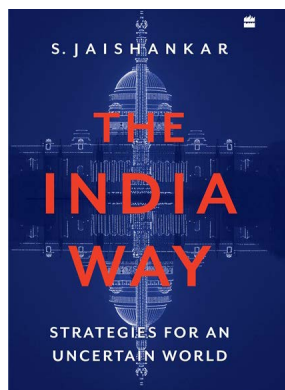
U.S.-Indian strategic cooperation since the onset of the Sino-Indian crisis clearly demonstrated that practical, even if asymmetric, collaboration between the two democratic nations was indeed possible. Washington vocally supported India in its efforts to confront China's occupation of the disputed territories, it moved quickly to provide the defense equipment requested by New Delhi, and it shared real-time operational intelligence

about Chinese military activities with India. The Indian government, for its part, responded by dramatically changing course on the Quadrilateral Dialogue (the Quad)—the diplomatic forum that brings it together with the United States, Japan, and Australia. From its earlier opposition to ministerial-level Quad meetings even on the margins of the UN General Assembly, India visibly shifted to promoting high-profile stand-alone meetings at different levels. Indian policymakers also encouraged the development of concrete Quad initiatives in diverse areas to push back against China, while stepping up their criticism of Beijing's pugnacity in the East and South China Seas and its Belt and Road Initiative. These actions increasingly converged with U.S. positions, especially during Donald Trump's administration, and raised once again the hope that New Delhi might finally “[junk \[its\] hoary shibboleths](#)—can't change neighbors, Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam, strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and what have you”—in favor of “a much closer alliance with the United States and its allies, assuming that such an alliance is on offer,” as Sushant Sareen argued in the *Economic Times*.



The Indian foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's recently published book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, offers a dramatically different, yet utterly authentic, vision of how the official mind in India imagines the country's international posture—even in the face of direct threats posed by a hostile neighbor such as China. To say that this volume is brilliant in both style and substance would be an understatement. It is written in a richly aphoristic vein often requiring the reader to supply the intellectual conjunctions that make its numerous apparently simple propositions intelligible. Yet its underlying message is plain and unexpectedly honest for a work produced by a serving cabinet member.

As might be expected, the book sheds light on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign (and, sometimes, domestic) policy over the last six-odd years, occasionally offering a veiled defense of his various actions. This apologia, however, can be ignored because nothing should distract from the work's more fundamental objective, namely the elucidation of India's vision of itself and its behavior in global politics. To clarify these issues, Jaishankar covers the entirety of India's foreign relations with all relevant powers and regions of importance to New Delhi as well as the twists and turns in India's economic policies over the years—a vast landscape that cannot be reviewed here. He also interrogates



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diverse topics ranging from the history of India's foreign policy to its strategic culture (with the chapter on the latter, "Krishna's Choice," offering penetrating insights not found in almost any other published work on this subject). But underlying this panorama lies one big and urgent question: how should India conduct itself in the evolving international system?

This query lies at the heart of India's grand strategy and Jaishankar's contribution, which is self-consciously aimed at "encouraging an honest conversation among Indians" but "without discouraging the world from eavesdropping" (4), offers an argument that dashes all hope that India might one day become an ally of the United States.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, Jaishankar repeatedly and emphatically avers that Indian grand strategy in an uncertain world requires "advancing [its] national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions" (11) so as "to extract as much [*sic*] gains from as many ties as possible" (9). Precisely because India is presently disadvantaged in its power rivalry with China, New Delhi, along the way to expanding its national capabilities, must resolutely focus on "leveraging the external environment to address [these] bilateral imbalances" (49). "Here, the weaker player solicits or manipulates stronger forces to [its] advantage" (62), which in a world "of multiple poles and greater choices" (27) requires that "India must reach out in as many directions as possible and maximize its gains. . . . In this world of all against all, India's goal should be to move closer towards the strategic sweet spot" (42).

While such a strategy is eminently sensible in a competitive international system with cross-cutting fractures, it will undoubtedly be challenging because "keeping many balls up in the air and reconciling commitments to multiple partners takes great skill." Yet because "there will be convergence with many but congruence with none" (41), political dexterity

1 Unless otherwise noted, page citations here and subsequently are from S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020).

is essential to manage the “multi-alignment” (103) required to accomplish the complex foreign policy tasks facing New Delhi today. As Jaishankar summarizes these, “this is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbors in, extend the neighborhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support” (10)—all while continuing to reform economically and grow faster in a democratic system that is witnessing an ever “more vivid expression of [native] beliefs and traditions” (207).

The preoccupation with leverage that pervades Jaishankar’s thinking about how India should approach international politics is striking because it underscores the importance that New Delhi places on benefiting from the emerging rifts in the international system. Recognizing that China’s rise has disturbed the U.S.-led international order in ways unseen since the end of the Cold War, Jaishankar admits that the evolving collision between Washington and Beijing generates “a host of strategic challenges” for India. But the solution for New Delhi cannot consist of pursuing any simplistic alignment with one over the other. Rather, “developing the mindset to not only respond but actually leverage that [competition] is what could define the new India” (6).

In fact, the endurance of cleavages at the core of the global order is what makes the possibility of leverage viable to begin with. As Jaishankar candidly admits, “extracting more from the international system depends on the bigger picture and a zero-sum game cannot be an assumption” (99). At various points in the past, condominiums between different great powers have in fact materialized. These have proven to be exceptionally dangerous to Indian interests because they make New Delhi the target of potential collusion rather than positioning the great powers as rivals to be played off each other. By contrast, modulated great power competition of the sort currently occurring between the United States and China benefits India more than either untrammelled animosities or, what is clearly worse, connivance: it

has created the conditions whereby Washington has “developed stakes in India’s prominence,” thereby enabling New Delhi to profit from “that sentiment to the fullest” (41), even as it can take some comfort from the possibility that more powerful opponents such as Beijing might arguably “have limited interest in an aggravation of ties” (27). After all, as Jaishankar reflecting a wider Indian sentiment puts it, “they too operate in a world of multiple poles and greater choices. The future is, therefore, more one of management of differences and finding some stability in a changing dynamic. This will not be without problems and the key is to develop and sharpen strategic clarity. Even with neighbors with whom there are serious issues, there should be hope that the price of a pragmatic settlement will be less than the costs of a difficult relationship” (27). This attitude has clearly shaped the Modi government’s approach to negotiations with China over mutual disengagement along their contested border in eastern Ladakh.

In any event, the conclusion that “leveraging others is central to success” (53), more than any other, characterizes Jaishankar’s analysis as the quintessential Indian view bridging other divides in its domestic politics. The symmetry between his right-of-center reasoning and the left-of-center argument offered almost a decade ago by another Indian foreign policy document, [Nonalignment 2.0](#) (Center for Policy Research, 2012), is noteworthy in that the latter also declaimed famously that the “core objective” of Indian grand strategy “should be to give India maximum options in its relations with the outside world—that is, to enhance India’s strategic space and capacity for independent agency—which in turn will give it maximum options for its own internal development” (paragraph 9). Similarly, Jaishankar argues that India’s rise requires “a persistent striving to expand space and options. Not an end in itself, [rather,] that is meant to ensure greater prosperity at home, peace on the borders, protection of our people and enhancing influence abroad” (73).

The conviction that “India has little choice but to pursue a mix of multiple approaches, some orthodox



and others more imaginative” (6)—all involving diverse partnerships, where “leveraging them all may not be easy but [is] still no less necessary for that” (7)—is colored significantly by the Trump presidency during which Jaishankar’s book was published. This era shaped several of his key assessments: that there is a growing diffusion of power internationally, with the United States no longer the fountainhead of order; that a consequential fracturing of globalization exemplified by protectionism and reshoring has occurred; and that the postwar international system has irretrievably eroded thanks to both Trump’s refusal to uphold Washington’s external obligations and the recrudescence of nationalism, parochialism, and identity politics within the United States and abroad. All together, these judgments lead Jaishankar inevitably to the conclusion that New Delhi faces not so much “the end of history” but rather an unmistakable “return to history” (111) characterized by renewed self-regarding behaviors, international contestation, and above all, “the natural state of the world,” which is “multipolarity” (12).

On some of these counts, Jaishankar’s inferences may be premature. For starters, reports of the death of American hegemony are greatly exaggerated. The structural power of the United States, however battered its reputation, has proven to be remarkably resilient despite Trump’s idiocies. The liberal international order also endures because, even amid Trump’s rhetorical assaults, the United States faithfully continued—and still continues—to uphold that system in diverse realms. Similarly, benign globalization too has for the most part survived and shows no signs of disappearing: while some retrenchment is underway, the larger cross-national movement of goods, services, capital, data, and people is here to stay and will not be fundamentally arrested short of a major systemic war. These flows will further diffuse power by some metrics, but whether this amounts to the onset of multipolarity is debatable. Finally, while Jaishankar is right that the challenges posed by nationalism and identity politics are likely to be more enduring, even here much will depend on how the

United States performs over the next four years, both in regard to its own post-pandemic economic performance and the quality of leadership that President Joe Biden demonstrates in domestic politics and in foreign policy.

Nevertheless, what is most important about Jaishankar’s argument pertaining to the “return to history” is less his theorizing than the purposes he puts it to. When all is said and done, *The India Way* is aimed at shaking his compatriots out of what he sees as their paralyzing national traits: self-absorption, fixation with dogma, and perpetual risk aversion.

The attack on self-absorption is motivated by the desire to force an appreciation of the dramatic changes occurring in India’s international environment, most importantly, the rise of a powerful and problematic China that cannot be contained by the existing international system and hence poses serious threats to New Delhi. This objective may have produced an exaggerated perception of the changes occurring in international politics, but even if not, Jaishankar certainly seeks to rouse India from its “default option of playing defense” (4) because the stable and predictable postwar system that India has long been used to is rapidly disappearing. Given this fact, India’s traditional solipsism must give way to renewed activism that involves, inter alia, “taking on global responsibilities, acting as a constructive player, and projecting our own distinct personality, [all of which become] elements of th[e] solution” (11). Encouraged by India’s own growing capabilities, he argues that “our approach should be to build comfort with the world, not opaqueness or distance” (11).

Denouncing the fixation with dogma is intended to encourage India to think more pragmatically about its strategic choices instead of seeking continued refuge in the ideological bromides of the past. By using the example of how first China exploited U.S.-Soviet rivalries during the Cold War and later American complacency to build its own national power, Jaishankar too urges India to set aside its traditional predilection for hedging “on the big

global divides” (61) because of an inveterate “obsessing about consistency” (72). Rather, Indians must learn to pursue what may look like contradictory policies, seeking to build strong relationships with the oddest bedfellows, if they are to find themselves “in a position to exploit opportunities” required by “the purposeful pursuit of national interest” (73). Whether reflected in the domestic contentiousness over the U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal or the Modi government’s decision to freeze dialogue with Pakistan because of terrorism—where the criticisms of both policies are attributed to stale, outdated presumptions—Jaishankar contends that “the accumulated ‘wisdom’ of the entrenched or the passionate argumentation of the polarized” (73) cannot be allowed to become impediments to India’s ascendancy. In fact, “the real obstacle to the rise of India is not any more the barriers of the world, but the dogmas of Delhi” (73).

Finally, the counsel against risk aversion is remarkable because of Jaishankar’s conviction that India can do well—often better—when it acts decisively even in the face of adverse odds. Traditional Indian foreign policy often justified its cautious international behavior on the grounds that the nation’s material weaknesses required circumspect actions that avoided giving offense. The upshot of this “low-risk foreign policy,” however, was that it was “only likely to produce limited rewards” (100). In contrast, when India acted boldly, it was able to enjoy spectacular gains. The 1998 nuclear tests remain, in Jaishankar’s telling, the example par excellence of how gutsy decisions made even in the face of great anticipated international opposition procured dramatic benefits for India: the tests forced the world to accept India’s nuclear weapons program and opened the door to its eventual integration into the global nuclear order. This episode demonstrates that while India undoubtedly needs accumulated national power to succeed, it demands equally “leadership and judgment to take advantage of . . . a favorable environment” (41) through bold action because “no serious practitioner of politics will accept that foregoing opportunities to leverage will ever be rewarded” (27). Obviously, success

requires the ability to accurately assess the international environment within which such decisions are made, and this in turn implies that the policymaker must be, just as Machiavelli would demand of his prince, “[more or less virtuoso](#).”

But what are all these virtues intended to achieve? Here, Jaishankar’s right-of-center worldview both encompasses and transcends the contentions of his left-of-center interlocutors in an interesting way. In *Nonalignment 2.0*, the latter group had argued that although “there are few ‘natural’ groupings—whether defined by political vision, economic profile and interests, or geopolitical security challenges—into which India can seamlessly fit,” the country’s “diverse identity and . . . multiple interests” remained its “greatest strategic assets at the global level. For it [*sic*] means that India can be a unique bridge between different worlds. Indeed, India’s bridging potential is one we must leverage and turn to our active benefit” (paragraph 124). Jaishankar similarly contends that an India “not driven by victimhood . . . [unlike China] . . . has the potential to serve as a bridge between the established and emerging orders” (114). But unlike his left-of-center compatriots, who ground this bridging function in their desire to promote “a new and alternative universality” as “the foundation for creating a more just and equitable global order” (paragraph 307), Jaishankar’s vision of India “as a power that can bridge divides” (116) is grounded more emphatically in a confident nationalism that has as its “foremost priority” the creation of “a stable balance in Asia” (11)—an outcome that can only materialize when India becomes a full-fledged pole in the international system.

As he declares succinctly, whether it involves justification by narrative or the creation of favorable strategic outcomes, “for India, it is all about the pathway of its own steady rise, while also responding to the compulsions arising from the posture of others” (184). Building Indian power is thus critical because “it is only a multipolar Asia that can lead to a multipolar world” (11). Since the emerging international system



“is also likely to fall back on balance of power as its operating principle, rather than [on] collective security or a broader consensus” (32), the “need for building up strong overall capabilities” is only complemented by “the need to develop the mind games which are more relevant to the likely [threat] scenarios” that will face New Delhi (52). For all the talk about multipolarity, however, Jaishankar is astute enough to recognize that India’s emergence as a “leading power” remains “a goal on the horizon”; it should not be treated just yet as “a statement of arrival” (103), which only confirms that “eventually, leading abroad will require delivering at home” (17).

Jaishankar’s vision of India’s role and ambitions is thus unabashedly realist—but without any crude materialism. He values and makes central the production and the wielding of power, but he also recognizes the importance of legitimating India’s growing capabilities and securing the support of others in New Delhi’s endeavors. Consequently, even as he persistently advocates exploiting global contradictions for India’s own benefit, he concurrently affirms according “primacy to the nurturing of goodwill, beginning with India’s immediate neighborhood” (11). Protecting the rules-based international order; contributing toward the production of global public goods; occupying the moral high ground whenever possible; “putting out explanations” (48) that can “shape and control the narrative” (63) about India’s rise; popularizing cultural contributions such as yoga, Ayurveda, and namaste; encouraging “the more prolific use of our own languages in interacting with the world” (12); and striving to be “liked [rather] than just being respected” (11) all together constitute the functional and ideational correlates necessary to secure international approbation. Yet these contributions are not intended to be solely instrumental or just about “ambition.” Rather, playing nice nicely amalgamates the inheritance of India’s civilizational idealism, as reflected in Modi’s slogan “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas” (13)—which translates to “Together, for everyone’s growth,

with everyone’s trust”—with the imperatives of power accumulation and status improvement.

The boldness with which India must play the international power game is ultimately what makes Jaishankar’s *The India Way* distinctive. Unlike more cautious practitioners who might advocate reticence because of India’s still considerable weaknesses, Jaishankar demands that India punch above its material weight. As he declares, “India could rise in an incremental way, as it was hitherto wont to do, hoping to play a balancing role as new equations came into play. Or, it could be bolder and seek to determine agendas and outcomes” (40). That this strategy, which requires “a greater willingness to make waves” (8), could be successful hinges greatly on his judgment that “dominating the global stage today is very different from earlier days” (37). Because “persuasion and incentives are . . . more common than coercion” presently, the “accumulation of influence substitutes for much rarer exercises of strength” (37), thus giving even weaker powers like India a chance to shape outcomes if only they are daring enough to leap into the scrum. To do so is not only advantageous but also ethical insofar as doing right always implies doing right by India. Unfortunately, Jaishankar ruefully notes, the opportunities for such gains are often lost “even when there is a pathway” to success because of the Indian elites’ “lack of resolve or a fear of the costs” (50).

A spirited Indian pursuit of multi-alignment is thus essential because it enables New Delhi to overcome the risks by combining “national strengths and external relationships” (9) in a virtuous interaction where “all major relationships” (92), centered on “strategic convergence rather than tactical convenience” (103), “remain positively in play so that one can be used to make gains in the other” (92). This “more energetic and participative” approach stands in contrast to “nonalignment,” which Jaishankar characterizes as “an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement” (103). This criticism is a tad harsh because former prime

minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of nonalignment, especially prior to 1962, witnessed substantial Indian activism internationally precisely because it was a useful mechanism that compensated for India's deficits in raw strength. It admittedly produced some ill effects, as Jaishankar correctly flags at several points in his book, but avoiding every reverse would have required superlative clairvoyance on the part of India's leaders, a trait that is unreasonable to expect in the turbid world of human politics.

In any event, while Indian multi-alignment will take it toward diverse partners in its quest to expand its national power, the West remains a—if not the—pivotal buttress for India. Underlying Jaishankar's survey of India's myriad international relationships is a translucent effort to get the Indian public, which has been long addicted to a leftist skepticism about the West, to appreciate its renewed importance for the Indian project of building out its national power. Western economic and technological supremacy alone, of which the United States is the singular paragon, ensures its priority in Indian grand strategy going forward. And "the Indo-American relationship . . . . obviously [subsists today] at the heart of the overall approach to the West" (125). As Jaishankar elaborates, "the most impressive [Asian] growth stories of the last 150 years have all been with the participation of the West," and while the latter had had its own self-interested reasons for supporting the expansion of Asian prosperity, the challenge for partners such as India now lies in how "to utilize that option and handle its consequences" (123) artfully.

Thanks to its history and institutional inheritance, India is already part of the political West. However, the legacy of colonialism and the antagonisms of the Cold War have left India with an ambivalence about its membership despite the economic benefits that derived over the years. The current and prospective threats from China, however, ensure that New Delhi's hesitations notwithstanding, the gravitation toward the strategic West will only intensify. Prime Minister Modi's foreign

policy has already confirmed this direction. But India is still hobbled by its belief that an alliance with the United States would [rob New Delhi of its agency](#), an expectation that the history of Western intra-alliance politics during the last seven-odd decades amply refutes. Nevertheless, India's sense of self, its colonial past, its substantial natural endowments, and its strategic potentialities all combine to strengthen its determination to protect its freedom of action and one day ascend to the pinnacle of the global system as an independent great power. This vision enjoys substantial support across the political spectrum in India. Consequently, New Delhi will pursue the closest possible relationship with Washington consistent with its own self-interest, since "it is [only] logical for India to work with those who value its influence, advocate a larger role for it and are comfortable with its activities" (184).

Toward that end, Jaishankar shrewdly notes that "India has to maintain a narrative in the United States of its value, whether it is in terms of geopolitics, shared challenges, market attractions, technology strengths or burden-sharing. And it must [not only] be customized for the President of the day [but], given the discontinuity in American policy, it is also important that [this] engagement continuously factors in the updated priorities [of the sitting president] and the issues that emerge from them" (126).

Even as it does all this, however, India can be expected to maintain productive ties with many other countries, including some that are at odds with the United States. Because these latter relationships often function as the proof of India's strategic autonomy to itself, New Delhi will preserve these affiliations for whatever tangible benefits they also happen to produce along the way. Moreover, given India's relative economic underdevelopment still, it will continue to act as the voice for the global South, even if that role sometimes irritates the United States. As Jaishankar warns, India will continue to "be a more South-Western power than the West may desire" (120).



This strategy of pursuing closer, but not exclusive, ties with the United States will therefore survive for multiple reasons that include: New Delhi's belief that the U.S.-led alliance system itself is weakening in solidarity and hence offers greater room for simultaneous partnership and dissent; India's own growing power, which enables it to juggle multiple orthogonal affiliations with greater confidence; and, above all, the Indian expectation that the deepening U.S.-China competition will only make India more important because "the dominant helping the rise of the aspiring" (24) guarantees that Washington will support New Delhi if for no other reason than to constrain China locally, even if India chooses never to become a card-carrying member in any of America's diverse alliances. The prospect that both the United States and China will "have a use for third parties as they contest each other" (33), then, creates room for India to benefit from their rivalry without chaining itself exclusively to either or even the friendlier of the two powers.

Whatever else might be inferred from this proposition, *The India Way* makes clear that an alliance with Washington is simply not in the cards where New Delhi is concerned. India may tilt more strongly toward the United States if required by the pressures of necessity: as Jaishankar notes, "India made the adjustments required on stressful occasions" before, gravitating toward the United States and the Soviet Union alternately when extreme threats required it during the Cold War, but "whenever crises receded, India went back to the middle path" (26). As an aspiring great power with a storied history and an auspicious future, it can do no other.

This aversion to alliances, however, does not pose insuperable threats to meaningful cooperation with the United States, even if New Delhi always does so with an eye to its own interests. As long as the United States does similarly, all will be well. India seeks to leverage

American power to build its own national strength in order to engender multipolarity; the United States must seek to leverage India's rise in order to preserve its own global primacy. There may come a time when these strategies turn out to be antithetical. For now, they are merely antinomous. And, as such, they can be reconciled if both countries pursue their complementary interests without undue sentimentality.

The biggest threats to fecund cooperation often arise from mistaken expectations—with these dangers residing most conspicuously in Washington when U.S. policymakers, either elated by episodes of intensified cooperation or mesmerized by the mirage of a formal alliance, begin to envision India as an American confederate. Jaishankar's masterly exposition confirms this to be an illusion. At a time when the Biden administration is developing its own Indo-Pacific strategy and reconsidering how New Delhi ought to be integrated into that design, *The India Way* should be indispensable reading because it proves that the intersection of the two nations' self-interest—with all its possibilities as well as its limits—remains the surest foundation on which to sustain the ongoing transformation of U.S.-Indian relations.

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## NOTES

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