



Ear to Asia Podcast

Title: India's two-way bet on the US-Russia divide

Description: India has now on four occasions abstained from voting in the United Nations to censure Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. New Delhi's muted response to Moscow's military offensive may seem mystifying given India's own experience of armed incursions by China, as well as its membership in the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("the Quad"). So what binds India and Russia? How does India reckon with a world order largely created by western powers? And for how much longer can India sit on the US-Russia fence? Veteran India watchers Prof Ian Hall and Dr Pradeep Taneja examine India's options with presenter Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Listen: <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=990164>

Voiceover:

The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Ian Hall:

India's got to do whatever is required, really, to prioritize the social and economic development of India. India's going to form partnerships that sometimes are a bit contingent, that sometimes are a bit limited where India doesn't say the same thing or do the same things we might want them to do but it's going to have, to my mind at least, good reasons for doing that.

Pradeep Taneja:

For India, there aren't too many other options. India cannot have Russia and China working together along with Pakistan against India's interests. So India needs to maintain that relationship with Russia but at the same time it needs the United States to meet with India's even bigger challenge which is China.

Ali Moore:

In this episode. India's two-way bet on the U.S.-Russia divide. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne. India, a liberal democracy and member of the US led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has now on four occasions abstained from voting in the United Nations to censure Russia over its invasion of Ukraine that began on the 24th of

February. The muted response to Russia's military offensive may seem mystifying given India's own experience of armed incursions by China into what it considers its sovereign territory, most recently in 2020, but India's refusal to condemn Russia's aggression is not an isolated case of India supporting Russia and vice versa.

The two powers have a longstanding relationship, which began in the cold war era with the forging of strong strategic, economic and diplomatic ties between the then Soviet Union and a newly Independent India. So how does a shared history translate into the current India Russia relationship? And how does that relationship sit up against India's growing security ties with the United States? And the ultimate question, how long can India continue to walk on both sides of the street? Joining me to discuss these questions are long time India watches Professor Ian Hall from Griffith University and Dr. Pradeep Taneja from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the university of Melbourne. A very warm welcome to you, Ian, and welcome back Pradeep.

Ian Hall:

Thank you. It's good to be with you.

Pradeep Taneja:

Hi Ali.

Ali Moore:

On the face of it, India appears to be, not exactly sitting on the fence. In fact, they are literally straddling it with a leg in each camp. On the one hand Delhi is an official strategic partner with Washington. It's declared other partnerships with Japan, the UK, France, and indeed Australia. And of course it's in the quad. On the other hand, Delhi has got this longstanding and multifaceted relationship with Russia, and most obviously has declined to criticise Russia's attacks on Ukraine. So Pradeep, which camp does India have more to gain from?

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, I think India has more to gain from both camps in a way. And that's been the key feature of India's stance on this Ukraine crisis because India needs the United States to deal with its principal challenge, which is China, but also with Pakistan. Whereas with Russia, India again needs help from Russia, particularly in terms of defence equipment acquisitions from Russia, which India has been doing for decades now, but also with Pakistan. We've seen lately Pakistan and Russia have begun a defence relationship, also China has been Pakistan's key supplier and key diplomatic and strategic ally. So India needs to deal with both China and Pakistan, and that's why it needs the new partnership with the United States in the west is critical for dealing with the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific, but it also needs Russia to deal with both China and Pakistan.

Ali Moore:

Ian, do you agree that India has got much to gain from both?

Ian Hall:

Yes, I think so. Look, India has gained a lot in terms of acquiring significant military hardware, but also advanced military technology that they can't easily get elsewhere. Things like nuclear power, submarines, things like advanced defence systems. So it's acquired those things from the Russians in the past, and it's still acquiring some of those things from Russia today. I think long term India's got more to gain from the United States than it has from Russia even before this war began. Russia's trajectory was arguably not particularly good over the long term, but nevertheless, I think India still wanted to be able to steer between these different powers, even though those other countries, the

United States or Russia might have their own differences, India much preferred to be able to steer between them and to gain what advantage it could from the various different parties.

Ali Moore:

So if we look at that military technology, that weapons dependency, if you like Pradeep, how did that start?

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, India's defence relationship with the Soviet Union goes back to the 1960s. In fact, if you look at the political and diplomatic support from the Soviet Union to India, it goes back to the mid 1950s. In 1955, Khrushchev, in fact, almost publicly supported India's stance on Kashmir and basically took sides with India on the Kashmir dispute. In 1962 Soviet Union wasn't as forthcoming and over support for India and its war with China. But following that, I think since the 1960s, Soviet Union has been a consistent supporter of India and a supplier of military hardware, and particularly in 1971, when India was dealing with millions of refugees from East Pakistan and Indra Gandhi was looking for support from the United States. In fact, Indra Gandhi went to Washington and did not receive a very good hearing from the Nixon administration. And later on, she signed a 20 year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union.

And that was in a way, the beginning of a serious strategic partnership between the Soviet Union and India. And after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this relationship has continued even though over the last 15 or 20 years, India has been looking at the United States and Western partners also for defence and strategic partnerships. But Russia has continued to be an important supplier of military hardware to India. Russia's share of India's defence acquisitions used to be almost 80%, but it has declined. It has continued to decline. I think the latest figures are that it's about 49% of India's hardware imports are from Russia, which is still very significant. But when we talk about these imports of defence equipment from Russia, we have to remember that a lot of it actually also is spare parts because there is lot of legacy equipment from the former Soviet Union in Russia, which needs to be maintained with spare parts from Russia. So although Russia continues to be an important supplier of military hardware for India, its significance is declining as India buys more and more from the U.S., France and other Western countries.

Ali Moore:

And Ian, how much of the relationship is mutual? We're talking a lot here about out what India is getting from Russia. What is Russia and indeed the former Soviet Union. What did they get from India?

Ian Hall:

In terms of conventional trade, the value of bilateral trade between Russia and India is not huge. Looking at about ten billion dollars, U.S. dollars a year, but India plays a really crucial role in sustaining the Russian defence industry. And that's one of the ways in which Russia earns valuable foreign currency and also manages to maintain its own military might. So in a way, having partners and this includes China as well; it's in the past bought a lot of Russian military equipment. Russia's been able to sustain that industry since the end of the cold war, despite all the other problems it's had, partly because of India's assistance. Now beyond that, Russia does gain in terms from India. And I think Russia has been looking to India as a rising power, just like other countries have, thinking that in the future that India may be able to play a bigger part in say, buying Russian hydrocarbons, whether it's oil or gas, or there have been other specific things like Vladimir Putin has been keen to try and encourage Narendra Modi to encourage Indian businesses to invest in the Russia's far east, for example.

And so we saw a summit a couple of years ago in Vladivostok in the far east, where there was encouragement for India to be more involved in that part of the world. And that's partly because this is not a well developed area of Russia, but also because of course China is right there on the doorstep as well. So India's a hedge for Russia as well against the China dominated Asia.

Ali Moore:

And if we turn this back to what India gets, if you look at the newly independent India, how important in what was Soviet financial contributions, technical know-how to India's development?

Ian Hall:

Yeah, very much so. I think in the 1970s and 80s, when India found it difficult to be able to access a lot of this technology elsewhere. Lately though, India has acquired anti-aircraft systems from the Russians, that's partly because there aren't very good and economical alternatives that are available from other countries, but lately we've also seen some disagreements. So the two countries were supposed to be building a stealth fighter, fifth generation fighter together that arrangement fell apart for reasons that are at least unclear to me. So there's been a lot technology transfer in the past and in certain key areas. And here I'm thinking about things like submarine reactors, for example, Russia is just central. It's very difficult to imagine that another country would be willing to share that technology with India. So we've got these kinds of these legacy arrangements, these arrangements that are difficult to get out of that really do bind India and Russia together.

Ali Moore:

And when you look at the history, Pradeep, Ian mentioned that there have been some disagreements there. If you go back over the decades and you touched on this diplomatically before, but has it always been the case that India has abstained from votes in the UN in order to support Russia and indeed vice versa. Russia has done exactly the same to support India?

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, Russia is a permanent member of the security council. India is not, so India only from time to time get selected to the non-permanent seat in the security council, which it is at the moment, but Russia of course is much more significant for India in terms of its veto power in the UN Security Council. Russia or the Soviet Union used its veto to support India's position or to take India's side six times in the security council. So from India's point of view, I think Russia's permanent membership of the UN Security Council is far more important than India's vote in the security council is.

Ali Moore:

But India also has a vote in the general assembly, which they have used haven't they?

Pradeep Taneja:

Yes, they have. India, for example, if you look at on this Ukraine issue, India has both in the security council because India is currently a member of the security council. India abstained in the security council vote on Ukraine issue. India also abstained in the general assembly. But interestingly, when you look at the UN Human Rights Council vote to suspend Russia, India could have opposed as China did because China had also abstained earlier, but in the UN Human Rights Council, China decided toward against the resolution whereas India abstained and therefore an abstention in that situation was almost supporting the suspension of Russia.

Ali Moore:

That is an interesting point Pradeep, because many people look at the position that India has taken on Russia over the Ukraine and put them in the same basket as China. They're not in lockstep, are they?

Pradeep Taneja:

You see, on the surface, it looks like that India and China have taken a very similar stand. And in fact, many people in China have tried to draw the parallel that both India and China are taking a similar stand on the Ukraine issue, but the reality that there are significant differences between the Indian position and the Chinese position. So first of all, yes, both India and China abstained in the general assembly and in the UN Security Council. But the fact is that Indian Prime Minister, Prime Minister Modi has spoken with both the Russian President and the Ukrainian President, which the Chinese leaders haven't done. Also, India has consistently called for a cessation of hostilities. India has called for deescalation. China has also said that, but at the same time, China has been taking Russia side when it comes to a portioning blame for this current crisis. China has essentially taken the Russian position that the eastward expansion of NATO is to blame for the current crisis.

Whereas India, hasn't done that. India hasn't really tried to blame NATO for the current crisis. And if you look at the position of both China and India on this issue more broadly, we find other significant differences. For example, the Chinese state media has been amplifying the Russian propaganda on the causes and the consequences of this crisis, including amplifying the conspiracy theories, which are coming out of Russia about chemical and biological weapons labs in Ukraine, etc. Whereas India's official media hasn't done anything like that. India's in private media of course, some of it has been very supportive of Russia, but at the same time, we haven't seen Indian Government or Indian state-owned radio and television networks, Prasar Bharati and Doordarshan, they're taking the same position. So there are really significant differences between the Chinese and Indian approaches.

Ali Moore:

And we'll come back to that in the context of the U.S. in a minute. But before we get to the relationship with America, Ian, we've talked about the diplomatic and the military ties. What about energy? Because that is playing such a large part in the complexity of how countries are responding to Russia at the moment, where does India sit in terms of energy dependency otherwise on Russia?

Ian Hall:

So this is something that has been focused on quite a lot in the media and we seen it playing out in social media as well that India did go and buy up some Russian oil in the early stages in the first couple of weeks of the crisis. I think though, we do need to recognise that India is not a big consumer of Russian oil or gas. Most of that oil or gas goes in pipelines to other countries, whether that's Europe or to other countries elsewhere in Asia, India buys most of its oil from the Middle East. So India actually is not a big consumer in the same way as say Germany, most obviously is, and other European countries are. And of course China. So China is far more dependent on Russian hydrocarbons than India is. It's possible that down the line 10, 20, 30 years from now had things stayed the same that India would've tried to forge a closer relationship with Russia on this issue because the Russians are pretty keen to sell these hydrocarbons to India. But you know, that's not the case at the moment.

Ali Moore:

What about nuclear energy though? Ian, because Russia and India do have a number of joint projects around nuclear power, don't they?

Ian Hall:

Yeah. So that's where there is a very close relationship. And that's again one that India I think is going to probably have to unravel, but it will take some time and some effort to do that. So after India's nuclear test in 98, there was obviously some question marks about whether or not it should be allowed to benefit from the trade in civilian nuclear technology. The United States allowed that to happen basically by cutting a deal with the Indians in 2005, with the expectation that we would see American companies going into India and building nuclear power plants and so on. Now, somewhat ironically and unexpectedly, it was actually Russia that benefited from this and Russia became the big actor building nuclear power plants in India. That's one area in which I think we might see some change, but I don't think it'll be the United States that benefits from that. I have a strong suspicion that just like in the defence sector, it'll be France, which has a very active civilian nuclear industry that may well end up being the beneficiary of that process.

Pradeep Taneja:

Coming back to hydrocarbons, oil and gas, Ian is right. India's imports of oil and gas from Russia are really insignificant. It's only about 3% of India's total imports of hydrocarbons. And as India's Foreign Minister, Dr. Jaishankar, said in a retort to the American Secretary of State. I think he said, "Well you really should be talking to the Europeans because the amount of oil India buys from Russia in a year, Europe buys in one afternoon. So India's oil imports from Russia should not be a major concern." And another related fact is that the Russia operates an oil refinery in the State of Gujarat in India. And even that refinery mainly uses Middle Eastern oil rather than Russian oil. And the reality of course, is that bringing Russian oil to India is much more expensive than Middle Eastern oil. So I can't imagine Indian oil companies importing large quantities of crude oil from Russia.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others, plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au, I'm Ali Moore. And I'm joined by analysts of Indian Foreign Policy Professor Ian Hall from Griffith University and Dr. Pradeep Taneja from the University of Melbourne. Ian, if we can switch now from India's relationship with Russia to India's relationship with the U.S. and in recent years, as we've noted that has become an ever closer relationship. What have been the key drivers there?

Ian Hall:

Initially the key driver was that the United States was quite alarmed and shocked by the nuclear tests in 1998. And so they embarked on this conversation with India about that particular issue, but then it very quickly broadened out as both sides found that they had a number of viewpoints in common, strategic outlooks were starting to align on a number of issues, predominantly China, but some other issues too. Some of this was catalysed as well by 9/11, which happens in the middle of this process. And by the rather difficult relationship that the United States got itself into with Pakistan, trying to manage what was going on in Afghanistan and the need to talk to India about things like counter terrorism and to keep an eye on some of the Islamist Groups in south Asia. So there are a number of different things over time, though, this is really broadened out into two things.

So one, both countries are very concerned about not too much about China's rise, but about what China's intentions are and how uncertain those intentions are in the region and how disruptive China could be and whether or not China wants to dominate Asia. And then the other part of this, which is of course linked is that the United States has decided essentially to invest in India, sees India as a

rising power that is like-minded, although there are differences on some things. And that India is a great opportunity, not just as a strategic partner security terms in Asia, but that also India's economy could be quite dynamic. It has a very young population, it's involved in sectors that the U.S really cares about like information technology. And so this is broadened out into quite a substantive partnership between the two countries.

Pradeep Taneja:

I think the United States government, success of administrations have come to the conclusion that India is an essential partner in countering the China challenge, in dealing with the threat from China because they recognise that for India, China opposes the biggest strategic challenge. And if China is also so now seen in Washington as a big problem for Washington, then India has to be an essential ally. Remember that America's treaty allies in the region, such as Japan and Australia have their own limitations in terms of what they can contribute to an effort in encountering the Chinese influence. India on the other hand is not bound by any domestic constitutional constraints as Japan is, or by size because India is much bigger. It has one of the largest militaries and large domestic population. So despite, the economic potential of the U.S. and India relationship, I think the China factor is the defining feature. Even though it may not be stated publicly by both sides, but the China factor is the defining factor.

Ali Moore:

And if the China factor is the defining factor in the U.S.-India relationship, Pradeep what about the China factor in terms of Russia's relationship with China and how India is watching that and the interest that it has in that – particularly pertinent at the moment?

Pradeep Taneja:

When you look at Russia, India relationship, it has been consistent. In other words, ever since the former Soviet Union in India began to develop close strategic ties, they have continued, there hasn't been any rupture in the middle. Whereas China-Russia, the China-Soviet union relationship was strong in the 1950s. Then it deteriorated to such an extent that China signed up with the United States and invited President Nixon to China in 1972, and developed a close partnership with the United States to counter the Soviet influence. Whereas India has been a consistent friend of the Soviet Union and later on Russia, but India needs Russia as much as it needs the United States to counter the Chinese influence. While United States is a major partner of India in the Indo-Pacific, quad membership is very significant for that purpose, but India also needs Russia's assistance, particularly because it doesn't want Russia to become too dependent on China.

And remember the relationship between Russia and China has been transformed in the 1950s Soviet Union was the big brother and China was the junior partner, but increasingly we have seen China has emerged as the bigger partner in their bilateral relationship. And that relationship has been growing and it's not in India's interest to see a much closer strategic relationship between China and Russia. So India wants to maintain closed relationship with Russia to make sure that relationship between China and Russia doesn't become inimical to India's interests.

Ali Moore:

And Ian, when you look at that relationship between China and Russia, just a couple of weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, China and Russia declared no limits partnership, and the longer the war goes on, it would seem the more Russia will become dependent on China.

Ian Hall:

I think that's where the rub is for India actually. So we've already seen the U.S. defence secretary, Lloyd Austin saying, "You know what? The United States really aims in its support of Ukraine to degrading the capabilities of Russian military to the point where it can't really effectively threaten its neighbours anymore." And unfortunately for India, that's a bit of a problem. So India would've much preferred Russia to remain relatively powerful for as long as it could possibly be given its relative decline as a country, the population decline and all of those things, because it really doesn't want it to become dependent on the Chinese. Now I think a lot of Russians also don't particularly want to end up in a dependent relationship with China either, but the difficulty is going to be that Russia may not have any choice at the end of this conflict depending how it ends.

So if we are looking out a little bit – months, maybe a couple of years or so – the difficulty here is that India really wants have not a powerful Russia, but a reasonably powerful Russia that can at least hold its own and be able to say no to China when it has to. What we're seeing now is the United States and its allies and partners and so on saying, look, we'd actually like Russia to be weak enough that it's not going to threaten its neighbours. There's a divergence there of interests and perspectives that could become an issue. It's something that both sides are going to have to talk about in coming months.

Ali Moore:

Pradeep, how do you see the trajectory of the Russian-Chinese relationship?

Pradeep Taneja:

I think this war in Ukraine, when this war is over, Russia is going to emerge diplomatically, politically, and economically much weaker. In fact, I would add to that militarily because Russia will have to focus on rebuilding its capabilities. Russian weapons systems did not function as was anticipated in this war. Russia's logistics were very poor in the prosecution of this Ukraine wars. So I think there will be a credibility problem in terms of Russia's capability. And remember, one of the reasons why China has developed a closer partnership with Russia is not only because China needs friends, but also because China also buys in a Russian defence equipment, including S-400 anti missile system, which both India and China have bought from Russia.

So Chinese would be watching this prosecution of war in Ukraine by Russia, very closely. And they would also be looking at, what Russia has to offer to China in terms of technology, in terms of defence equipment, but politically and diplomatically, I think Russia would remain important for China, particularly because Russia is also a veto carrying member of the security council, an important partner. So China, Russia relationship, I think will remain important. From India's point of view, weakened Russia would be of a lesser value than a powerful Russia. So not that India necessarily wants Russia to remain a very powerful country, but at the same time, a weakened Russia also would not be particularly useful for India's interests.

Ali Moore:

So India's between a rock and hard place?

Pradeep Taneja:

It's in a difficult position, as I've said, India walks on both sides of the street and India's preference would be to continue to do that. And in fact, I think India's preference would be to go back to the 1950s. There was a time after independence when India built, these prestigious institutes of technology, the IITs the Indian Institutes of Technology. And if you look at the four initial institutes of technology that were built in India, they were built with technological collaboration with U.S., Russia, Britain, and France. And I think that's a good example. India would like to be able to continue to maintain cooperation with all major powers, whether or not in practise, that's going to be possible. I think time will tell, but there's a number of factors I think we need to consider.

One of them, of course, is going to be the U.S.-China relationship. We know the U.S.-China relationship has changed over the last few years. China was seen as a significant economic partner by the United States. China was seen as transforming itself and therefore perhaps becoming like a more liberal society, but that hasn't happened. Now changes in China's domestic could also have a bearing on future U.S., China relationship. So there's a lot of unknowns at the moment, but India's ability to walk on both sides of the street, I think would depend on both internal and external factors.

Ali Moore:

I did just want to explore a few more issues in the U.S., Indian relationship. You touched on it, but what we didn't really talk about was America's relationship with Pakistan and how that affects relations with India and how that's changed in recent years?

Ian Hall:

Yes, that's a very vexed question, I think. So now, obviously the United States has got a long standing relationship with Pakistan that runs right the way back into the 1950s, but the way that things are set up today are really functions of what happened after 9/11 and the choices that were made both by the United States and Pakistan. The United States famously gave Pakistan a very clear choice between supporting its friend in the Taliban in Afghanistan, which it had played a murky role in supporting during the 1990s, if I could be blunt about it and basically said to Islam about, look you're going to have to come over to our side and you're going to have to help us to remove the Taliban from Afghanistan. When we roll on 20 years, we see the Taliban back in control of Afghanistan.

And we also see that the close relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan has been maintained and has been very clear. And in some ways Pakistan has been playing a diplomatic role of trying to promote the new Taliban regime as a partner that at least can be spoken to by others internationally, even if it hasn't been too vocal in promoting the interest of Kabul under the Taliban. So this is a relationship I think, where both sides feel that there's some buyers remorse that they got themselves into a relationship that did not play out in the way that they expected. There's significant mistrust on both sides. And that's played out recently in Imran Khan's comments, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, who was removed from power by parliamentary votes when he lost confidence in parliament just a few days ago. Imran Khan blamed the United States for instigating him being removed from power, which I don't think there's any evidence that's the case, but Imran Khan blamed the United States.

So this is a pretty scratchy difficult relationship. From the Indian perspective, unfortunately India's view on this sometimes is to say to the Americans, "Well, we told you, so we told you that there were dangers in getting involved too closely with Islamabad. We told you that there were very close connections between some bits of the military in Pakistan, allegedly, and the Taliban, and you didn't pay any attention to us and you didn't listen to us in the way that you should have done." And then of course on top of all of that, Afghanistan has now fallen to the Taliban and Afghanistan under the previous government was very close to New Delhi. New Delhi was very happy to see a non-Taliban, non-Pakistan aligned government in Kabul.

And it had that for a period of time and that's now gone. And historically when governments that are inimical to India's interests are sitting in Kabul that has some pretty significant security consequences for India itself because some of the militants, the jihads and so on that may be causing trouble in Afghanistan. Once that issue is settled and they're dominant in Afghanistan, they've in the past turned their interest to India and principally to Kashmir and have carried out attacks within India itself. So the 20 year relationship with Pakistan, the loss of Afghanistan, that's all made India's situation a little bit worse. And that is an issue in India, United States relations.

Ali Moore:

Ian, on that India-United States relations, and going back to the quad, to what extent is that quadrilateral security dialogue that also includes Japan and Australia, to what extent is it an extension of the growing ties between the U.S and India?

Ian Hall:

It's very much an extension of those growing ties. I think in the Japanese case, Japan was looking to rebuild its relationship or to build a stronger relationship with India in the 1990s, for a variety of different reasons, some of them commercial and economic and so on. But the fact that the United States has been willing to play a role in bringing together, playing matchmaker, if you like, between Japan and India has been welcome in Tokyo. And so coming into something like the quad has been pretty attractive to at least the last few Japanese governments. In the Australian case, the U.S. relationship with India was even more important. Australia and India have historically had quite a distant relationship, quite an estranged relationship, even quite a difficult one, quite mutually critical in the past. There's not been a lot of people to people connections between the two countries has never really been in a very substantive economic relationship until the last 20 years.

And so I think both in New Delhi and in Canberra, there was a view that yes, these countries are important, but they're not that important to our interests, but the United States rapprochement with India in the 2000s really changed both Indian views of Australia and Australian views of India, and catalysed the bilateral relationship. And so the quad is one expression of these broader, better, bilateral relationships, as well as an attempt to try to manage a lot of the negative consequences from just China's weight and China's rise in the region. And again, those uncertain intentions, we're not entirely sure what Beijing would like to do in the region. So the Quad's a way of managing all of that, and it really wraps up together. All of these improvements in the various bilateral relationships.

Ali Moore:

Pradeep, we are talking about India walking both sides of the street. How important do you think the quad is to the American side of the street?

Pradeep Taneja:

I think the Quad is very important to the American side. Quad after all has been around, it was not an American idea. It was in fact, in a way a Japanese idea, but it has grown in significance. Americans have really adopted it very seriously. President Biden, injected new life into it by calling the first virtual summit and later on face to face personal summit meeting between the quad leaders. So I think Americans have now concluded that this partnership with their traditional treaty allies Japan and Australia, but also including India is very important to America's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

If India is sometimes seen as being the weakest link in Quad, I think that perception will dissipate slowly because this is an argument that has been made by people, both in Australia and the United States that India is perhaps the weakest link in the quad. But I think that's the wrong perception, because I think India has a much clearer understanding of its own interests now, and it is pursuing its strategy, which may seem contradictory to outsiders. But at the same time, I think India has a very clear view of where it wants this relationship with the United States to go. And Quad is very much an important part of that relationship.

Ali Moore:

At the same time Pradeep, how important is how the countries in the Quad? And how the U.S. responds? Because it seems to a certain point, right now India's been given a bit of a leave pass over its reaction to Russia over the invasion of Ukraine. So it's India's ability to walk both sides of this street is going to be dictated to an extent isn't it, by how others respond to it?

Pradeep Taneja:

Indeed, but I think it's a work in progress on both sides. I mean, on the side of the United States and Europe, don't forget that Europe is an important player in this too. They're not members of quad, but they have developed an Indo-Pacific strategy of their own and therefore they are increasingly playing an important role. And India's relationship with Europe is also changing. As we've seen recently, the European Commission President was in India, the British Prime Minister was in India. So we've seen growing closeness between Europe and India, which we haven't seen in the past. And in fact, Prime Minister Modi is visiting Europe in early May. He's visiting Germany, France and Denmark. So we've seen despite India's position on Ukraine, the relationship with both the United States and Europe is changing, it is transforming, but it is a work in progress in the sense that both India and the West need to understand each other better.

And I think in India, there is a realisation that there would be challenges that this strategy of walking on both sides of the street is going to require modifications from time to time and that it entails risks. And those risks will have to be managed. On America's side, I think there is an understanding that India will not behave itself the way America's treaty allies do and therefore India as a partner will have to be managed very closely. The U.S. will have to work very closely with India in understanding India's national interests, India's strategic interest. Basically U.S. will need to develop a new mindset. In the Quad war, you had a binary situation where either you were friends of the United States or you were adversaries, whereas that is not the case. The new environment requires a new approach to relationship. And India, I think represents a prime example of a partner that can be prickly from time to time. But at the same time, it is an important partner in the overall American strategy.

Ali Moore:

Ian, you started this interview by talking about India ultimately having more to gain from the U.S., but do you think that for the time being, they're going to continue to try and straddle both or do you think there will become a point where it's going to be too costly to maintain the traditional ties with Moscow?

Ian Hall:

I think it's worth answering these kinds of questions really by going back to first principles, you know what is India's paramount objective? That is the social and economic development of India. And I think that's entirely correct that the India's elite should focus on that. It is the most important thing. It is also consequential for humanity, given that more than 1.3 billion people live in India and many of those people remain desperately poor and their human development is really a very fundamental priority. So India's got to do whatever is required really to prioritise that goal of developing India itself. The rest of us, I think need to just appreciate that. And they need to appreciate too that just governing India itself for the sheer complexity and size and scale and everything else is an enormous challenge. And that India doesn't have enormous resources to focus on international relations or to focus on the rest of the world or to play the managing role that, say, the United States does.

And so putting all of that together, India is going to, as Pradeep said earlier on, it's going to form partnerships that sometimes are a bit contingent, that sometimes are a bit limited, that sometimes where India doesn't say the same thing or do the same thing as we might want them to do, but it's going to have, to my mind at least, good reasons for doing that or at least reasons that we should appreciate as being reasonable. But I think in terms of how far we can project things into the future or make predictions, dangerous though that is in the business that we're in, I think it is manifestly the case that India has much more to gain from the West, not just in the United States, but also from closer connections with Europe and with Japan and also with Southeast Asia and countries like Australia as well, that it does from what is effectively a declining petro state, armed nuclear weapons that is Russia for all of the historical connections and the technological links and so on.

Ali Moore:

And Pradeep, as Ian says, it's hard to crystal gaze. But perhaps the one thing that we do know is that as India goes forward with this particular strategy, it is at times a true diplomatic tightrope, isn't it? And it's going to require enormous skill to negotiate that at tightrope.

Pradeep Taneja:

It would indeed. I mean, this is a strategy which is very resource intensive. It would require India to commit significant diplomatic resources to maintaining this strategy. But this is really what India needs at the moment, because for India, there aren't too many other options. India cannot have Russia and China working together along with Pakistan against India's interests. So India needs to maintain that relationship with Russia, but at the same time, it needs the United States to meet with India's even bigger challenge because remember the strategic challenge that India faces in relation to China is military, but more than that, I think it is an economic challenge. India's biggest challenge is to develop its economy, focus single mindedly on the economy because without India catching up with China in economic growth, in economic development, India would not be able to devote the defence resources, the diplomatic resources, which are needed for India to maintain its standing in the international arena. So India needs the United States, it needs the West to meet with its economic needs, the economic challenge, so that it can meet with its strategic challenge, which is China.

Ali Moore:

It is an absolutely fascinating topic of conversation. And I know there's so much more that we could explore, but we are out of time and enormous thank you to both Pradeep and to Ian for your contributions and your insights on Ear to Asia. Thank you so much for joining us.

Ian Hall:

It's been very good talking to you. Thank you.

Pradeep Taneja:

Thank you, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Dr. Pradeep Taneja from the University of Melbourne and Professor, Ian Hall from Griffith University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website and be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia, by following us on the apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show and please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the April 29, 2022. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under creative commons, copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.