

PROFESSOR RAJA MOHAN'S VISIT TO SPAIN: UNDERSTANDING INDIA'S VISION ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

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This paper has been prepared after Professor Raja Mohan's three-day visit to Spain on the occasion of the launch of the Spain-India Observatory (SIOb) the 14th of December 2022. It puts forward the main conclusions based on the lines of analysis and ideas shared by one of the most prestigious Indian foreign policy experts. Professor Mohan's agenda in Madrid included a keynote speech on "Europe and the Indo-Pacific: A Vision from India" and a working meeting with representatives from Spanish think tanks and experts on Asia, both held at the headquarters of the Fundación Ramón Areces, followed by dialogues with students on "Priorities and Future Challenges for Indian Foreign Policy" at IE University and on "India's Role in the Challenging Balance of Power of the Indo-Pacific" at the Diplomatic School of Spain. Among the institutions and entities represented at the several activities organised were: Acciona; Aspen Institute España; Casa Asia; Casa de la India; CIDOB; Embassy of India in Spain; Escuela Diplomática; European Union Institute for Security Studies; Fundación Alternativas; Fundación Ramón Areces; IE University; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation; Observatorio de las Ideas; Real Instituto Elcano; SEPIE; Spain-India Council Foundation; Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies; Universidad de Valladolid.

* The views and analysis expressed in this Outcome Paper are those of the authors exclusively, based on Professor Raja Mohan's interventions during his visit to Spain in December 2022. This Outcome Paper does not reflect any opinion or endorsement by the Spain-India Council Foundation.

GLOBAL TRENDS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

Return of great power rivalry

Over the last decades, the world has witnessed a progressive decline of great power relations. The relative harmony among all major powers in the unipolar world created after the collapse of the Soviet Union —when the international system was economy-centred— has experienced a transition to a more security-oriented approach. That period of relative harmony has been transformed into actual war in Europe, as result of the Russian aggression, and a potential conflict in Asia, where China is exhibiting greater assertiveness. The return of the great power rivalry and the consideration of warfare as a real option among global major powers have changed the world geopolitical landscape.

Towards a measured de-globalization

Globalization was thought to be irreversible and ineluctable, eventually leading to a single geoeconomic and geopolitical reality. However, the trend over the last decade after the Global Financial Crisis, which has been accelerated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, shows that a shift towards de-globalization has encouraged a more measured form of economic interaction. While the focus of globalization was on efficiency, today the world is moving towards a focus on resilience. Considering that globalization and interdependence can be misused and weaponized —as it has been the case during the pandemic—, resilience has become a key element in an increasingly competitive international system. A resilient supply chain with reliable like-minded partners offers better alternatives than today's vulnerable and less secure efficiency-oriented supply chains.

Weakening of international institutions

Recent global crises have shown that international organizations have been unable to ensure peace and security and to bring equitable growth in the world. The fact that a permanent member in the UN Security Council (UNSC), Russia, is at war and always backed by another permanent member, China, makes the UNSC toothless. The World Trade Organization (WTO) was meant to transform the global economy

for the common benefit, but it has not succeeded in closing the gap between developed countries and the Global South. In the Indo-Pacific region, the weakening of this network of international institutions is encouraging the emergence of new coalitions to confront long-term challenges.

RESHAPING OF ASIA'S REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER

The Indo-Pacific has come to stay

Regions in Asia are politically constituted beyond geographic considerations, having denominations changed over time. For instance, while the concept “South-East Asia” was coined during World War II, the term “Asia-Pacific” was brought by the USA as it began to interact with China. By the same token, the idea of the “Indo-Pacific” is a product of the rise of China and the emergence of India, with the aim of framing a region that is in continuous reshaping by both its dynamic balance of power and the construction of its new security architecture. The Indo-Pacific as a new geography is here to stay, along with all subregions comprising it, where connectivity and security issues are paramount.

The key competition between the USA and China

Within a generation, China has risen from a mere economic power to a mighty military actor. Today China is the second largest economy and the second largest military power in the world, and it has profoundly altered the regional balance of power of the Indo-Pacific. China's various attempts to unilaterally change the territorial status quo have shaken the region, like in Ladakh, the Senkaku Islands or in the South China Sea. Its economic and military superiority has given China considerable advantages vis-à-vis its neighbours, hence the relevance of an enduring presence of the US in the Indo-Pacific for certain countries in the region. According to the US National Security Strategy, despite the war of aggression in Ukraine, Russia is a short-term threat, while China is the long-term challenge.

An increasing coalition building as a reaction to China's assertiveness

China's enormous weight and influence within the region and the belief that the West is in decline have given the Asian giant a renewed confidence. This self-assurance, nevertheless, has been challenged by the emergence of new regional security networks in which Western countries participate as well. Although ASEAN was destined to be the fulcrum around which the political architecture and collective security of the region would be created, the fragile unity of South-East Asia has been exposed by China's regional involvement. The Chinese assertiveness, however, has made its neighbours question their alliance strategy and has given the US an opportunity to create new security coalitions in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing believes it to be part of a US balancing strategy, the so-called "5-4-3-2-1", referring to the Five Eyes (US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), the Quad (US, India, Japan and Australia), the AUKUS (US, UK and Australia), the American bilateral alliances and the US itself as the main counterbalancing power. In a region which had not seen any robust alliances in the past, nowadays a multiplicity of coalitions reshapes the regional balance of power.

INDIA'S GREATER INVOLVEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

New Indian foreign policy approach to the region

While the US has signed mutual defence treaties with Japan, Philippines, South Korea and Australia-New Zealand, India and the US are not allies in the field of defence. However, India is a key actor to attain a stable military equilibrium within the Indo-Pacific. The idea of the Indo-Pacific is certainly also about involving India in the region, since only in partnership with India can the strong regional competition be effectively tackled. In turn, although India has traditionally been reluctant to taking sides and engaging with the West in security issues, India is now open to a deeper partnership with the West to cope with the regional challenges. This pragmatic India with a more ambitious foreign policy creates new strategic opportunities for the US and Europe.

The Indo-Pacific, India's platform to a multipolar world

The security threats in the Indo-Pacific have also compelled India to look beyond the old coalitions with Moscow and Beijing —the RIC forum with Russia and China or the BRICS which also includes Brazil and South Africa— that Delhi sought to build to limit the unipolar moment of the 1990s. The Quad —which brings together Australia, India, Japan and the United States— plays today a central role in India's regional security strategy. Beyond the Quad, India is also engaged in a range of minilateral institutions in the region as well as through bilateral cooperation with key countries of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, India aims to seize the opportunity of hosting the G20 in 2023 to become a leader of the Global South, so as to expand its partnership network beyond the Indo-Pacific as well as to strengthen its position within, which would enable India to play a key role in global governance.

The promising geo-economic role of India

There is great optimism about the Indian economy, which is expected to become the third largest economy in the world by 2030. The connectivity challenges in the Indo-Pacific have shown that India has a vital role in a resilient supply chain within the region, and several governments, including India, have promoted different initiatives in order to reduce their dependence on China. Besides, while the China Plus One business strategy is progressively increasing foreign investment in India, PM Modi-led policies are boosting the manufacturing capacity of India in many sectors, like defence or semiconductors. Indian policymakers are following a more pro-business stance in the last few years.

PATHWAYS FOR EUROPE'S PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Europe's growing awareness of the Indo-Pacific

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has become central to Europe's strategic calculations. The NATO summit held in Madrid in June 2022 was attended for the first time by four Asia-Pacific countries (AP-4): Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. Indeed, security in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are no longer

dissociated but addressed jointly. Europe has started to come to terms with this geopolitical assumption and both the EU and European countries individually have issued guidelines on the Indo-Pacific —like France, Germany or the Netherlands—, which demonstrates that challenging balance of power has transformed the Indo-Pacific into a great geopolitical chessboard.

India's renewed vision of Europe as a key partner

India has not traditionally regarded Europe as a strategic security partner. Nevertheless, for the first time Delhi is paying serious attention to Europe, which has become central to India's own security, as well as to the stability and prosperity of Asia. India's reluctance to partner with Europe has progressively diluted as India is interested in Europe participating in the region, by offering an alternative to the BRI or to share the burden of securing the Indian Ocean. India, indeed, sees that Europe has a critical role in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. However, the European Union might still be perceived as a non-geopolitical actor by many Asian countries including India, which requires a determined EU involvement in the region in cooperation with the EU member states.

Expanding opportunities for cooperation between India and the EU

Cooperation opportunities between India and the EU are numerous given the latter's position in the region as an advocate for a rules-based international order, a committed ally on sustainable and inclusive growth, and an innovation leader. Europe and India share common challenges and values, making possible for Europe to participate in the regional security, beyond the military realm, by contributing to the establishment and enforcement of normative standards and as a key technology partner. Moreover, a greater presence of Europe by building the capacities of individual Asian countries —also in cooperation with India— in terms of security and defence, resilient supply chain, and digital transformation and cybersecurity is more valued by the regional partners as a key contribution to a more secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

ANNEX 1: INTERVIEW TO PROFESSOR RAJA MOHAN BY CARLOS TORRALBA AT EL PAIS NEWSPAPER. PUBLISHED ON DECEMBER 21ST, 2022. (ORIGINAL IN SPANISH, NON-OFFICIAL TRANSLATION)

Raja Mohan, geopolitical expert: "Border clashes between China and India are a constant danger"

The Indian analyst and scholar argues that Beijing is trying to alter the status quo in the Himalayan border areas, and that New Delhi's imports of Russian oil do not affect the interests of Europe

Tension on the Sino-Indian border is dangerously high. On December 9, dozens of soldiers from the two most populous countries on the planet once again got into a fistfight in the Himalayas, at more than 4,000 meters of altitude, very close to Bhutan. "The danger of border skirmishes is constant," says Raja Mohan (Chirala, Andhra Pradesh, 70 years old), an Indian scholar specialized in geopolitics. "And it is not going to decrease in the short term," adds the analyst at the Asia Society Policy Institute. Clashes with stones and sticks between Chinese and Indians have occurred in the last decade in different areas of the 3,440 kilometres that separate the two Asian giants.

Dozens of soldiers had to be treated for bruises, fractures and cuts after this last month's encounter. A 1996 bilateral agreement establishes that firearms cannot be used in border areas, a pact that has been respected except for a few occasions and that clearly mitigates the risk of a chance encounter leading to a massacre. The most serious incident in the last four decades between the Indian and Chinese armies took place two years ago [June 2020], when at least twenty Indian soldiers died —some thrown down the cliffs— along with several Chinese in a frost area near Pakistan [*in eastern Ladakh on the disputed border between Delhi and Beijing*]. "If Russia triumphs in Ukraine, China will do something similar in Asia," Mohan remarked last Thursday in an interview in Madrid, during a visit to Spain on the occasion of the launch of the Spain-India Observatory, an initiative that promotes analysis and joint reflection on the relations between the two countries.

Question: Why do these clashes occur along the border?

Answer. The territorial claims of both countries over disputed areas have always existed, but from the 1980s the border was kept calm and the risk of skirmishes became practically non-existent. Since 2008, and especially after Xi Jinping came to

power [in 2013], China began to feel much stronger and to try to unilaterally alter the status quo on the border, building infrastructure around it, and raising the number of soldiers deployed in the area and enhancing their capabilities. It is not something that only happens in the Himalayas, it is the same strategy that we see in the South China Sea [where Beijing disputes the sovereignty of some islets with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei] or in the competition with Japan in the East China Sea.

Q. It is surprising that two atomic powers face each other with sticks and stones.

A. Fortunately, and unlike what happens with Pakistan, the nuclear shadow has never been present in this conflict. Neither of the two countries has deployed atomic weapons near the border or threaten to use them, but I don't see a short-term solution or a reduction in tension. There is no sign that China is going to stop making inroads over the Line of Actual Control [a name used to refer to the effective and unagreed border], and India will continue to withstand them. The situation is really complex; Chinese and Indian troops are operating ever closer, in some of the most remote areas of the world, and the danger of encounters is constant. I suspect some skirmishes don't even make it to the top.

Q. India is one of the world's largest arms importers and one of Russia's main buyers. Is there a certain military dependency on Moscow?

A. In recent years, agreements have been reached with other countries, such as the United States, France or Israel, and modern Russian weapons have not been acquired recently [*The S-400 is the only exception*]. However, the Indian Armed Forces have so much Russian weaponry from the past decades that we need Moscow to continue to sell us ammunition and parts for maintenance and repairs. And given the current context, with China and Russia proclaiming an alliance without limits, it is key that we can continue buying Russian material, while diversifying imports and boosting domestic production.

Q. What has increased dramatically in recent months are Indian imports of Russian oil at a much cheaper price than the EU countries would have paid.

A. The Indian economy is highly sensitive to inflation and 90% of the oil consumed in the country is imported. If there is cheap crude oil on the market, India will buy it, which also implies that it is not dependent on one sole country for oil supply [*taking into account that choices are few for India since there is a number of oil producing countries under sanctions*]. Delhi would be interested in seeing the

sanctions against Iran and Venezuela being lifted and, consequently, putting much more oil on the market.

Q. Chinese and Indian imports are dampening the effects of European sanctions on the Russian economy, and some European capitals are criticizing India for rule out joining a cap on Russian oil prices.

A. They should not criticize us when even the whole of the EU has not stopped importing Russian oil and gas, and there are still as different positions on how to achieve peace as those represented by France or Poland. There is no doubt that what Russia is doing in Ukraine is absolutely unacceptable, and it is essential that the EU stands together to counter Russian aggression. If Russia ends up winning, Europe will be thrown into chaos and China will do the same in Asia. As the Japanese Prime Minister [Fumio Kishida] has said, 'Ukraine is the future of Asia', but Indian imports of Russian oil do not harm the interests of Europe. The United States, more pragmatic than some European countries, has realized that if China and India did not buy Russian oil, the West would be paying an even higher price for Middle Eastern crude.

Q. Talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin occur frequently, and the Indian government has chosen to abstain from those resolutions condemning Russia passed at the UN. Do you believe, like some analysts, that India could mediate between Moscow and Kyiv?

A. I think India's capacity to mediate is easily overestimated. India can try to influence some issues, as it did during the deal freeing up grain exports, but forcing a lasting peace is not within its reach.

* Clarifications to the original text have been included in italics, between brackets.