

India's NATO Engagement: Old Inhibitions and New Imperatives

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Summary

Despite frequent overtures by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), India has shown little interest in engaging it. As Russia and China deepen their partnership and NATO intensifies its outreach to the nations of the Indo-Pacific, India might have to review the implications of the unfolding integration between the European and Asian theatres and reconsider its hands-off attitude to the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

Traditionally, India has been stone-cold in its responses to the offers of engagement from the world's most powerful military alliance – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). India's reluctance is rooted in its traditional policy of non-alignment and its enduring strategic partnership with the Soviet Union and later Russia.

India's stand-off attitude, however, faces a new context that at once limits the possibility for New Delhi's engagement with the alliance and generates new imperatives to engage NATO.

The negative side of the ledger is the deepening conflict between Russia and NATO after Moscow's aggression against Ukraine. As New Delhi carefully navigates the complex dynamics between Russia and NATO, India is unlikely to make a radical departure in its thinking. India's earlier signals of a softening attitude towards NATO might be harder to pursue amidst the war in Europe today.

New Delhi had, in fact, invited NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to speak at the Indian Foreign Office's premier international forum – the Raisina Dialogue – in April 2021. This was the first time the NATO leadership had participated in an official Indian forum.

During his address, [Stoltenberg affirmed](#) that "India was at the forefront" of many shared security challenges, including "Afghanistan, international terrorism, to maritime security". He insisted that there was more that India and NATO "can do together", including "consult, coordinate and take concerted action".

Meanwhile, the ideological questions about non-alignment are becoming less meaningful in the prospects for engagement between India and NATO. India today is closer than ever before to the Western world. New Delhi has a strong strategic partnership with key Western countries, including the United States (US) and France. India has also stepped up [security dialogue with the European Union](#).

India has also shed some of its opposition to plurilateral arrangements with the West. It is now an active member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also called the Quad) that brings India together with Australia, Japan and the US. However, India has carefully avoided

branding the Quad as a military alliance, as [some of its activities](#) have a significant strategic and security orientation. India also conducts the ever more sophisticated [annual Malabar naval exercises](#) with the US and its Asian allies – Australia and Japan.

Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has pushed two neutral states of Europe – Sweden and Finland – into seeking NATO membership. In the early decades of the Cold War, Sweden was an important partner of India in [developing collaboration](#) between neutral and non-aligned states. No ideology can be immune from changing circumstances. India's ideology of non-alignment and opposition to military blocs has been steadily modified in its post-Cold War international relations.

India actively participates in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), led by Russia and China, which has many military dimensions. India is an active member of the SCO, which is designed to limit US influence in inner Asia, but it is reluctant to engage NATO, underlining the real but unstated pro-Russian bias in Indian security policy. It has little to do with the ideology of non-alignment but everything to do with the special relationship that New Delhi has built with Moscow over the last few decades.

However, India's Russian partnership is increasingly constrained by Moscow's growing tensions with the West as well as its deepening strategic partnership with China. This coincides with the steady deterioration of India's ties with China and the sharpening conflict between Washington and Beijing.

As balancing China becomes the dominant imperative for India, it has embraced the idea of the Indo-Pacific, helped revive the Quad, and welcomed the growing interest of the European powers, including France, the United Kingdom and the EU, in the region.

Although India has not formally welcomed [NATO's growing outreach](#) to the Indo-Pacific in recent years, it has no ostensible reason to quarrel with it either. Any additional pressure on China from Europe and NATO cannot but serve India's interest in balancing Beijing. After all, in the last few years, India has often tried to [persuade Russia](#) to tone down its hostility toward the Indo-Pacific, if with little success.

What we have seen is a tightening embrace of Russia and China that complicates India's regional calculus. Moscow and Beijing have drawn closer, especially after they unveiled a partnership "without limits" and no "forbidden areas" just days before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This, in turn, has intensified a drift towards the integration of the Asian and European theatres, which were long seen as separate. The circle was closed at NATO's Madrid summit in June 2022, which saw the [first ever participation](#) of the prime ministers of Australia, Japan and New Zealand and the president of South Korea.

As the new interactive dynamic between the Sino-Russian strategic partnership and NATO's Asian engagement unfolds, India cannot forever take a segmented approach to Europe (and Russia) on the one hand and the Indo-Pacific (China) on the other. As New Delhi recalibrates its strategy, engagement with NATO [must inevitably figure](#) in India's geopolitical agenda.

Beyond the question of India adjusting to the shifting geopolitical terrain, there are significant immediate benefits for New Delhi in any bilateral engagement with NATO. As a former senior US official, [A Wess Mitchell](#), put it, India can gain substantially from a partnership with NATO, including military, strategic and technological, without in any way constraining its broader strategic options.

Sceptics will keep their fingers crossed. However, optimists will point out that India has made many unprecedented changes to its international relations in recent years – if quietly and in an incremental manner. It will be no surprise then if India’s attitude to NATO will continue to evolve in the coming years.

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