

Narendra Modi in Hiroshima: India and the Renewed Great Power Conflict

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Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the summit of the G7 nations and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in May 2023 has showcased India's growing global salience as well as his own impressive stewardship of Indian foreign policy over the last decade. Yet, Modi also has the challenge of navigating the deepening geopolitical tensions among great powers and seizing the opportunities from the changing global economic order.

As he races to complete his second term as prime minister, foreign policy remains higher than ever before on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political agenda. The [intense and consequential moment](#) of Indian foreign policy also presents some unprecedented challenges for Modi's leadership.

As the chair of the G20 this year, India has been leading the wide-ranging activities of the forum that will culminate in a summit in Delhi in September 2023. Well before that, Modi will be hosting the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Summit in July 2023.

In June 2023, Modi will be travelling to Washington for a state visit that is expected to consolidate the expanding bilateral relationship with the United States (US). In July 2023, Modi will make a bilateral visit to France, which has emerged as a valuable partner for India.

Modi was in Hiroshima for the G7 summit from 19 to 21 May 2023. He also participated in a truncated meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) that brings together Australia, India, Japan and US. The Quad leaders were to meet in Canberra in the last week of May 2023 but US President Joe Biden had to call off the visit to attend to a domestic confrontation with the US Congress on the debt ceiling.

From Hiroshima, Modi is travelling to Papua New Guinea on the first-ever visit by an Indian prime minister to that country. At Port Moresby, Modi will attend a summit of the Pacific Island states that is expected to raise India's standing in the increasingly contested Pacific region. In Canberra, Modi will have a bilateral meeting with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and address the growing Indian diaspora in Sydney.

This vigorous phase in India's international relations is certainly boosting Modi's image at home as a world leader on the eve of the scheduled general elections in early 2024. But the current international situation is also testing Modi's political skills. He is under pressure to recalibrate India's great power relations in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine. He also has the opportunity to help India gain from the Western effort to "de-risk" the economic relations with China.

The Hiroshima summit saw the US and host Japan [make a big effort](#) to unite the advanced nations in confronting the simultaneous challenges presented by Russia and China and widen the G7 coalition to include key non-Western nations. The G7 countries are intensifying the sanctions regime against Russia, whose war against Ukraine continues.

Washington and Tokyo also sought to reduce the divergence on China between them and the US. The [G7 summit underlined](#) the continuing need to engage China while confronting it on economic coercion and weaponisation of global trade.

While the Europeans saw the dangers of Moscow's aggression against Ukraine, they were less willing to confront the Chinese challenge. India has the opposite problem: while coping with the multidimensional threat from China has become Modi's principal preoccupation, he has minced words on the Russian war in Ukraine and its implications for global order – especially the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations. Delhi has not only been reluctant to stop buying Russian oil but has also dramatically increased the purchase of oil and sold some of it to Europe. This has led to some [stinging criticism](#) from the European Union.

Amid growing pressure on India to rethink its attitude to Russian aggression, Modi met with the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, on 20 May 2023 for the first time since the Russian war began in February 2022. Modi [did not criticise](#) the Russian aggression but promised to do all he could to resolve the Ukraine conflict.

That the US needs India to balance China has given Delhi some room for manoeuvre on the Russian question but that room will continue to shrink as Moscow's war against Ukraine enters the 16th month. Although Modi has refused to criticise the Russian war against Ukraine, Delhi is not quite comfortable with the situation it finds itself in between Russia and the West. To make matters worse, Russia's deepening alliance with China raises questions about the sustainability of Modi's special ties to Moscow over the longer term.

Whether stated publicly in Delhi or not, getting out of this difficult Russian corner is an urgent imperative for Modi. But engineering that change is hard in the near term, given India's continuing dependence on Russian weapons and the past political investment in the Russian campaign for a multipolar world.

Modi has chosen one important option to lessen the salience of the Russian connection. He has actively sought to build strong ties with the US. Delhi's converging interests with Washington on China have provided the basis for a productive engagement with the US. Delhi knows that the US-China confrontation is no longer a narrow geopolitical one but also a geo-economic one that promises an overhaul of the world economic system.

At the Quad summit on the margins of the G7 summit, Delhi [continues the conversations](#) with its partners on the diversification of supply chains and greater technological cooperation among trusted friends and partners. However, serious domestic reforms are needed to let India benefit from the US-led restructuring of the global economy.

As the global political economy passes through a hinge moment, India is in a strategic sweet spot. It remains to be seen if Modi can produce the necessary changes in its foreign and economic policies.

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