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NON-ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

ABSTRACT This paper explores India's strategic positioning vis-à-vis the liberal international order (LIO), examining how India has historically both engaged with and asserted autonomy from the Western-led order. It argues that India's evolving foreign policy—from Nehru's non-alignment to Modi's strategic autonomy—reflects a deliberate use of specific approaches to create space within the LIO for its unique national interests. The main argument of the paper is that India's engagement with the LIO has not involved wholesale rejection of the extant LIO framework but rather the selective leveraging and reimagining of liberal principles to preserve India's strategic interests while promoting a multipolar, more inclusive global order. India's approach to the LIO from its independence to now has been marked by continuity. Since 1947, India has sought to uphold sovereignty while benefiting from liberal principles, particularly in institutional and economic domains. The paper draws on the theoretical framework of defensive realism and institutional neoliberalism to deconstruct and highlight India's policy approach to the LIO, which is characterized by pragmatism and suggests that India could be described as a transactional power.

Keywords: India, liberal international order (LIO), non-alignment, strategic autonomy, defensive realism

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a liberal international order (LIO) as a dominant framework for contemporary international relations is a familiar one.¹ The liberal essence of such an international order is grounded in the Kantian trinity of democracy, international organizations, and economic interdependence.² To this end, the *liberal* international order holds the values of individual liberties and autonomy maintained with the protection and security of centralized authority through the consent of the governed; further, the extension of this centralized authority goes beyond state boundaries to the international institutions stabilizing social relations with rules, norms and principles; and economic interdependencies as an element that helps states to become consensually standardized in the order.³ Although generalizing about the scale and scope of the LIO is open to debate,⁴ material and moral progress through globalization, economic and political liberalism, technological advancements, and global governance structures in different regimes not limited to politics and economy have even forced the critics of the LIO to reckon with its apparent ineluctability.

As a cosmopolitan idea, the LIO started with an altruistic objective for peace, progress, and prosperity.⁵ Although facing multiple external and internal criticisms, the crucial debate regarding the constitutive elements of the LIO has been generated by the revisionist states posing the major challenge to its universal reach. The LIO has been so etched into the logic of global politics that any entity seeking a slightly *different* way of conducting its affairs has been thought of as a threat to this order. Thus, the challenges to the status-quo by revisionist powers like Russia and China to the 'American-led' liberal international order have been depicted as un-international, illiberal, and disorderly.⁶

In this context, India has also been placed into the same bracket by some,⁷ because of its rise as a threat to LIO. The question about India (*does it fit into the 'international' of the liberal international order?*) can be seen from two opposing perspectives. First, India's transformation to a sovereign state from the grip of colonialism can be viewed

¹ G.J. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2018), p. 20.

² B. Jahn, "Kant, Mill, and Illiberal Legacies in International Affairs," *International Organization*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2005), pp. 177-207.

³ D.A. Lake, L.L. Martin, Th. Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*," *International Organization*, vol. 75, no. 2 (2021), pp. 225-257.

⁴ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca 2018; D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford 2007.

⁵ M. Barnett, "International Progress, International Order, and the Liberal International Order," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1-22.

⁶ G.J. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal...".

⁷ A. Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2017), pp. 271-285; J.S. Nye Jr, "Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 1 (2017), pp. 10-16.

as an outcome of the emergence of a liberal international order after the Second World War: the country is the largest democracy in the world; it is a part of several functional regimes; it is an active participant in different regional and international organizations; and is among the largest economies in the world—which probably makes the country part of the LIO. On the other hand, concerns about India's role in the LIO have arisen because of critical views on the rise of Hindu nationalists, growing populism, complaints about violations of human rights and press freedom in critical regions like Kashmir and Manipur—being even called as 'electoral autocracy'—as well as an apparent quest for an alternative order beyond western hegemony through international organizations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which Miles Kahler has described as 'conservative globalizers'⁸. The third group of researchers try to combine these two contradictory approaches and emphasize the cultural and civilizational uniqueness of India and its attempt to find a third option in foreign policy, based on such principles as multi-alignment, exceptionalism and peaceful co-existence,⁹ presently being depicted through the Indian foreign policy essence of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam* (translated as Universal Brotherhood) and *Vishwa Guru* (translated as Global Teacher). Some Indian researchers and analysts write about India's role in the new international order, which they describe as the Liberal Post-Western World.¹⁰ Some scholars underline the gap between Global South and Global North and the lack of understanding between them which lead to 'new global disorder'.¹¹

Falling between the four views on where to place India in the liberal international order, a crucial question is why India's approach to LIO is characterized by continuity despite dramatic changes in global order in last 70 years. India's strategy for building its place vis-à-vis the LIO has not received sufficient attention while dealing with other aspects of its policy. Starting with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's initiative for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's stance of Strategic Autonomy—the country's flexible and adaptive alignment to benefit from the LIO has rarely received serious scholarly scrutiny. If scholarly articles did cover this topic, the change in approach can be emphasized by the keyword being—'shift'.¹²

⁸ M. Kahler, "Conservative Globalizers: Reconsidering the Rise of the Rest," *World Politics Review*, vol. 2 (2016), at https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/WPR_Kahler_BRICS_02022016.pdf, 25 November 2024; "Democracy Reports," *V-Dem*, at <https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>, 25 November 2024

⁹ Th. Wojczewski, "India's Vision of World Order: Multi-Alignment, Exceptionalism and Peaceful Co-Existence," *Global Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2017), pp. 111-123; R. Kumar, "India's Multilateral Foreign Policy Strategy: Phases of Its Evolution," *The Round Table*, vol. 111, no. 3 (2022), pp. 426-433; Th. Wojczewski, "Identity and World Order in India's Post-Cold War Foreign Policy Discourse," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2019), pp. 180-198.

¹⁰ S. Saran, "India's Role in a Liberal Post-Western World," in R. Alcaro (ed.), *The Liberal Order and Its Contestations: Great Powers and Regions Transiting in a Multipolar Era*, London 2018, pp. 92-108.

¹¹ See more: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 102, no. 3 (2023), at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2023/102/3>, 23 November 2024.

¹² R. Mishra, "From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: Assessing India's Foreign Policy Shift," *The Round Table*, vol. 112, no. 1 (2023), pp. 43-56.

While India's engagement with the LIO has evolved across various important leaderships, this study specifically focuses on the strategies of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi. These leaders have had distinct contribution in shaping India's positioning within the LIO—Nehru's foundational role in non-alignment, Indira Gandhi's pragmatic shift towards strategic alignment, Manmohan Singh's economic liberalization within a post-Cold War globalized order, and Modi's articulation of strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. Thus, this exploratory article attempts to view India's strategic approach throughout history via the lens of defensive realism and institutional neoliberalism as pragmatic efforts to benefit from the existing status quo. Therefore, rather than viewing India as a rising threat to the West, the article focuses on how India has adopted certain strategic approaches to construct, maintain, and legitimize a distinctive place in the LIO.

POSITIONING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: DEPLOYING DEFENSIVE REALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL NEOLIBERALISM

How does a state become a part of LIO? The answer to the question seems simple. The Westphalian principles—sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention—which are also the rudimentary elements of survival for a state, have made it clear to all that LIO is a long-term internationalist project rather than only an 'American-led' one.¹³ The contemporary system of states, which is Westphalian in nature, provides each state with the opportunity of admission to the LIO and makes it cosmopolitan in nature. Thus, admission into LIO is not an onerous task. However, staying in the order and benefiting from it in the long-run or transforming aspects of it to align with one's interests is a crucial task. In examining how to thrive successfully in the 'American-led' LIO without disturbing the status-quo, some studies have focused on how states have become democratic or uphold democratic principles, or on the inevitability of international institutionalism, or on different facets of economic regimes of interdependencies or interconnectedness.¹⁴ Conversely, other studies have focused on the contrary cases where the LIO is being challenged.¹⁵ There has been less scholarly attention on how a state seeks to position itself and benefit from the LIO through strategies based on holistic relevance of defensive realism and institutional neoliberalism.

The analytical relevance of the combined use of the defensive realism and institutional neoliberalism is determined by the following arguments:

- a) These approaches complement each other. The first one highlights to a greater extent the importance of security, sovereignty and integration in the context of external threats, the second one—without questioning the importance of systemic

¹³ G.J. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal...".

¹⁴ M. Barnett, "International Progress...".

¹⁵ D.A. Lake, L.L. Martin, Th. Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order..."; A. Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony...".

factors and international structure—points to the importance of cooperation between states and underlines the motives for why states cooperate, why they are engaged in supporting international norms, institutions. A key term in neoliberalism is *absolute gains*, meaning that international cooperation brings benefits to all participants and is an incentive for cooperation, not competition.

- b) Treating these two models together in the process of explaining India's approach to LIO will allow understanding of the continuity in the aims of India's policy and position in the LIO and flexibility of the instruments to achieve this.

In this context, the paper understands the LIO referring to concept presented by Edward Halizak.¹⁶ In international practice and in academic discourse, parallel to the UN system, there operates a normative, political concept of an international liberal order, which developed after World War II. This concept includes the following six elements:

- a) the institutions of the United Nations;
- b) institutions of the world economy (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization);
- c) global consultative institutions (G7, G20),
- d) global and regional security institutions (bilateral and multilateral alliances);
- e) economic cooperation (free trade zones, customs unions);
- f) humanitarian and human rights issues¹⁷.

In his definition, E. Halizak draws on researchers such as Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, who point out that the international liberal order is based on five structural elements, such as:

- a) security co-binding of states provided by various international institutions that thus mitigates the dynamics of anarchy;
- b) penetrated reciprocal hegemony which enhances legitimacy through access and shared decision-making;
- c) partial great powers (the special status of two great powers, Germany and Japan)—mechanisms to incorporate problematic states, which by accepting it contribute to the stabilization of the international order;
- d) economic openness, which enables exploitation of comparative advantages and creates interdependence;
- e) civic identity that moderates conflicts and facilitates integration¹⁸.

Moreover, Ricardo Alcaro emphasizes that the liberal order is ideological and normative: a project based on the following elements: 1) internationalism, based on is the assumption that states are not isolated units because they form an international community; 2) institutionalism, which is based on norms and rules; 3) regionalism;

¹⁶ E. Halizak, "Ład międzynarodowy," in E. Halizak (ed.), *Encyklopedia stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 629-630; J. Zajączkowski, "The Re-Integration of Regional Studies as a Sub-Discipline of International Relations," *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 53, no. 4 (2024), pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.; D. Deudney, G.J. Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), p. 181.

4) economic interdependence; 5) multi-level global governance involving many actors; 6) democracy understood as equality of rights and obligations of states in international relations¹⁹.

Based on this understanding of the LIO, this paper offers:

- a) A case study of India's approach to the LIO and the main independent variables, which drive the foreign policy of India: geographical anxiety and security dilemmas, representing crucial structural features of India's position in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region (the China and Pakistan factors, and the stability-instability paradox in the subcontinent);
- b) India's interaction with the main assumptions and elements which constitute the LIO.

Using both institutional neoliberalism and defensive realism allows us to explain India's approach and behaviour in the LIO. At the same time, although in the literature on the subject there is an ongoing debate between representatives of neoliberalism and neorealism (defensive realism) regarding the issue of absolute and relative benefits (neorealism) and other initial assumptions regarding cooperation, it must be clearly indicated that in the Indian case the combined use of these two approaches is justified and not is contradictory. This is due to the fact that defensive realism allows for a greater understanding of the goals and general assumptions of India's foreign policy, while neoliberalism allows for explaining how India tried to effectively use instruments and adapt to the existing international order in order to achieve its main goals. So, we are dealing with a cause-and-effect relationship. Moreover, some realist researchers argue that states' fears and distrust related to relative benefits can be reduced by adopting an appropriate strategy of action, international negotiations and the creation of effective international institutions²⁰. These assumptions fully allow for explaining the phenomenon of India in the context of the LIO. Despite a great distrust of, among others, the UN and international institutions during the Cold War and the last decade of the 20th century, India was aware that they were a guarantee of global and regional stability and also brought specific benefits to India (the USSR's veto right in Security Council was a guarantee for India in the context of the Kashmir issue).

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND 'NON-ALIGNMENT' WITH THE LIO

In the 1950s, the Prime Minister of the newly independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, shared the credit of non-alignment with three other leaders, namely Josip Broz Tito, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Kwame Nkrumah. The utility of non-alignment for India and other newly independent countries in the world was that they could draw a line

¹⁹ E. Haliżak, "Ład międzynarodowy"...; R. Alcaro, "The Liberal Order and Its Contestations: A Conceptual Framework," *The International Spectator*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-10; J. Zajączkowski, "The Re-Integration..."

²⁰ J.M. Grieco, "Realist Theory and the Problem of International Cooperation: Analysis with an Amended Prisoner's Dilemma Model," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 50, no. 3 (1988), pp. 600-624.

separating themselves from any power bloc politics during the Cold War.²¹ As Nehru himself explained in “The Discovery of India”, he was the one with the job of translating prophetic ideas into reality.²² With the ‘American-led’ LIO being in its foundational years at the same time, the ‘third-way’ ahead through non-alignment was considered an expression of India’s creative ingenuity for independent action, a representation of its broader conscience, and assertion of its need for complete sovereignty.²³ It was a perfect example of the application of defensive realism in practice while publicly rationalized through more idealist rhetoric.

The practical and symbolic power of non-alignment was such that as Neville Maxwell (1974) as cited in Lerner wrote *Nehru’s [foreign] policies were India’s, and vice versa [...constituting] his private monopoly*.²⁴ Mehta has characterized Prime Minister Nehru as an enigmatic persona with *no* comparison in Indian strategic thought.²⁵ Similarly, it can be claimed through Waltz’s classic model of first-image approaches to International Relations (IR) as a discipline’s analysis, that Nehru had an influential role in shaping the behaviour of India.²⁶ The deification of leaders during the embryonic stages of non-alignment and a few actions of founding leaders of this positioning internationally even led the West to think of it as the domain of dictators.²⁷ Nevertheless, the discursive and other aspects of the power of non-alignment were such that it spread as an influential strain of thought within the larger Global South as a movement. The world view that Nehru portrayed through the non-alignment discourse which appealed to the rest of the globe was to highlight the cruel alienation of the *rest* from world history and practices in general.²⁸ It provided the Global South with a [clear] direction amidst ambivalent attitudes towards the USA and USSR in the wake of the Cold war, opposing all kinds of political blocs and military alliances. Overall, non-alignment by Nehru gave a belief of *moral* standing to the Indian approach to international affairs.

Amidst the hot episodes of the Cold War, Nehru’s non-alignment discourse embodied strong idealistic hopes that would be highly appreciated by advocates of the LIO in some domains.²⁹ Thus, a formal Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) evolved that supported international institutionalist arguments, though it was never institutionalized.

²¹ A. Appadorai, “Non-Alignment: Some Important Issues,” *International Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1-2 (1981), pp. 3-11.

²² J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, New York 2004.

²³ A. Benvenuti, “Nehru’s Bandung Moment: India and the Convening of the 1955 Asian-African Conference,” *India Review*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2022), pp. 153-180.

²⁴ A.B. Lerner, “Collective Trauma and the Evolution of Nehru’s Worldview: Uncovering the Roots of Nehruvian Non-Alignment,” *The International History Review*, vol. 41, no. 6 (2019), pp. 1276-1300.

²⁵ P.B. Mehta, “Still under Nehru’s Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India,” *India Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2009), pp. 209-233.

²⁶ A.B. Lerner, “Collective Trauma...”.

²⁷ R. Kullaa, *Non-Alignment and Its Origins in Cold War Europe*, London 2012.

²⁸ A. Benvenuti, “Nehru’s Bandung Moment...”.

²⁹ S.K. Aryal, “India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ Policy and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI),” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2022), pp. 744-756.

The discursive power of 'non-alignment' was such that it enhanced India's standing as a professed internationalist even while it was a *de facto* isolationist regarding blocs and military alliances.³⁰ In 1948 during a speech in the Constituent Assembly, Nehru proclaimed *[I] have come more and more to the conclusion that the less we interfere in international conflicts the better*.³¹ This approach positioned India in the LIO with such a strong footing that it exercised political liberalism through self-determination in the post-independence era, and simultaneously, became an advocate of international institutionalism.³² At the same time, it helped India to maximize its interest and voice its thoughts on international justice, putting it into the bracket of pioneers of the third world.³³ In the wake of the *new* LIO and Nehru's non-alignment, for India, it aligned with post-colonial statecraft spreading the intangible sentiments of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. This provided a meaning for India, immediately after independence and, with the increasing hot waves of the Cold War, a shift of *feeling* away from the collective-psychological ambivalence regarding foreign dealings.

Non-alignment by Nehru helped India leverage the power struggle between the USA and USSR to protect its own interests. The period between the end of the Second World War and the embryonic stages of the Cold War evidenced, to an extent, the lapses in power transition theory because instead of the concentration of power by a single state immediately after the war to create a new international order, the struggle of power between two states for over forty years showed that international order may not simply be the artefact of a concentration of power.³⁴ In the multi-layered and multifaceted LIO, Nehru's non-alignment discourse kept India secure while avoiding military alliances, enhancing its liberal democratic solidarity, pursuing economic cooperation and navigating geopolitical complexities. By employing a strategy of non-alignment, India embraced core global rules and institutions such as the United Nations (UNO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Nehru's non-alignment strategy faced several setbacks too, for instance, when he was found to have eroded faith in the United Nations when the Kashmir issue in 1947 was not able to be resolved through a plebiscite—which was what Nehru wanted.³⁵ India's defeat in the Indo-China war of 1962 was also a setback for non-alignment as a long-term project, forcing India to sign an agreement with the USA.³⁶ Except for

³⁰ A.B. Lerner, "Collective Trauma..."

³¹ J. Nehru, "Non-Alignment with Blocs," in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, vol. 1, Delhi 1958, pp. 211-225.

³² P.B. Mehta, "Still under Nehru's Shadow?..."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ R.N. Lebow, B. Valentino, "Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory," *International Relations*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2009), pp. 389-410.

³⁵ A.Z. Hilali, "Kashmir Dispute and UN Mediation Efforts: An Historical Perspective," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1997), pp. 61-86.

³⁶ C. van de Wetering, "Developing US Relations with India: 1945-1993," in C. van de Wetering (ed.), *Changing US Foreign Policy toward India: US-India Relations since the Cold War*, New York 2016, pp. 29-82.

this, India by putting non-alignment discourse at its vanguard had signed treaties of friendship with Nepal and Bhutan, as well as the *Panchsheel* agreement with China.³⁷ Nevertheless, Nehru via non-alignment had placed India in a compatible position vis-à-vis the LIO. Despite few setbacks, Nehruvian non-alignment rhetoric can be said to have persisted until 1962, at least with least regard to alliances, blocs, and even substantive treaties. Indeed, the discourse surrounding non-alignment would serve as a theoretical pathway for Indian foreign policy to the present, establishing the foundations for Indian as a pioneer of the global south in advocating for international justice, world peace, pioneer of liberal democracy, anti-imperialism, and anti-colonialism, along with the benefits of international institutions.

INDIRA GANDHI AND 'STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT' IN THE LIO

After the selective positioning of India into the foundational liberal international order by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru until his death in 1964, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came into power with a different worldview—basically marking a more pronounced shift from Nehruvian idealistic rhetoric. Although echoing Nehru's utopian and altruistic focus on global peace and harmony, Gandhi went on to adopt a modified approach to world affairs of so-called strategic alignment. The discursive and practical balance of strategic alignment meant that India would continue to stay out of military and defence alliances but placed greater emphasis on military prowess to safeguard India's vital interests—the utopian approach became peripheral.³⁸ This shift in India's approach happened primarily because of their military loss in the Sino-Indian war in 1962.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's embrace of strategic alignments to reposition India in terms of the LIO (which as a liberal concept was itself in conflict with socialist ideology during the Cold War) had strong roots in the democratic world and can be viewed from two competing perspectives. First, strategic alignment incorporated certain utopian-sounding aspirations, such as supporting decolonization and an anti-colonial agenda, thereby portraying India as a beacon of the Global South. For instance, India was in staunch opposition to apartheid in South Africa, a supporter of the Palestine cause, and an opponent of the Portuguese colonial presence in Angola and Mozambique.³⁹ This approach put India in line with certain LIO principles as Prime Minister Nehru intended—a pioneer in leading the way for weaker states in the Cold War. On the other hand, with India realizing the need for military preparedness, it had come to understand the limits of collective security of the UN, and at the same time, did not want to join or create institutions for collective defence purposes. An example of the practical application of strategic alignment would be in 1971. Although the

³⁷ A.B. Lerner, "Collective Trauma...".

³⁸ S. Ganguly, M.S. Pardesi, "Explaining Sixty Years of India's Foreign Policy," *India Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2009), pp. 4-19.

³⁹ Ibid.

politico-diplomatic strategy to break up Pakistan would not appear to be aligned with LIO principles, India's portrayal of its action as a *liberation* of Bangladesh amidst the 'atrocities' which was the *casus belli* for India served to justify its stance.⁴⁰ By using these arguments, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi framed the 'liberation' of Bangladesh in ways that aligned with values and principles of the liberal international order.

Another practical aspect of India's approach of strategic alignment was seen when it signed a twenty-year 'peace, friendship, and cooperation' pact with the USSR in 1971 to guarantee security against Chinese aggression while going to war with Pakistan to *liberate* Bangladesh.⁴¹ With the frontiers secured against China, Indian troops marched along with Bangladeshi fighters the 'mukti bahini' (literally 'liberation force') to liberate Bangladesh.⁴² With the USSR, India's strategic alignment could be observed as an alliance to protect its territories in the north whilst it was involved in the east. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Gandhi's balancing of strategic alignments could also be observed in garnering support in the midst of the Cold War through her visits to the USA and Western European countries (Belgium, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) before *liberating* Bangladesh or going to war with Pakistan.⁴³ Contrary to Prime Minister Gandhi's plan, the US President Richard Nixon denounced the Indians as aggressors.⁴⁴ However, her practical steps of visiting different states secured support from the United Kingdom and France which would break the USA and pro-Pakistan directives in the United Nations Security Council.⁴⁵ The Indian approach to the 'liberation' of Bangladesh thus demonstrated the tactful deployment of strategic alignment which arguably strengthened the position of India in the LIO.⁴⁶

After 1971, India became the undisputed regional power in South Asia.⁴⁷ It was a serious setback for Pakistan and China, and eventually, the USA and the USSR realized India as a crucial partner in the international order. While dealing with strategic alignments in political, diplomatic, and military terms, India enhanced its position in the LIO but did not embark on economic liberalism which is a crucial part of the order. In this sphere, India was hampered by its state-led industrialization process, export weakness, failure to develop global economic ties which led to less foreign investments, technological lags, a lack of innovation, and poor entrepreneurship.⁴⁸ Despite all these

⁴⁰ Z. Haider, "A Revisit to the Indian Role in the Bangladesh Liberation War," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5 (2009), pp. 537-551.

⁴¹ Z. Mustafa, "The USSR and the Indo-Pakistan War, 1971," *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1972), pp. 45-52.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ S. Ganguly, M.S. Pardesi, "Explaining Sixty Years..."

⁴⁶ A. Ranjan, "Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971: Narratives, Impacts and the Actors," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 2 (2016), pp. 132-145.

⁴⁷ S. Ganguly, M.S. Pardesi, "Explaining Sixty Years..."

⁴⁸ C.R. Hankla, "Party Linkages and Economic Policy: An Examination of Indira Gandhi's India," *Business and Politics*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2006), pp. 1-29.

limitations, India's enduring commitment to international institutionalism was on display under Prime Minister Gandhi when India spearheaded the G77 in the backdrop of the oil crisis in 1973.⁴⁹ However, this would not last when India crossed the Nuclear Rubicon in May 1974 by successfully testing nuclear weapons.⁵⁰

Although India's engagement with the LIO under Indira Gandhi retained Nehru's non-alignment theoretical framework, the practical side shifted to being more agile in strategic, political, diplomatic, and military domains. This was manifested in a balanced approach: first, as being an advocate of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and non-aggression in line with LIO principles, and second, in leveraging the liberal order to strategically shift practical narratives. However, India's non-engagement with the foundations of the LIO for economic development was a failure. The socialist essence of economic policies within the country barred India from utilizing the economic benefits of the LIO.

MANMOHAN SINGH AND NON-ALIGNMENT 2.0.

The signing of the pact with the USSR by India in 1971 did not help in the long run.⁵¹ This step also symbolized a departure from a non-alignment policy. With India being the greatest regional power in the sub-continent after 1971, its diminished US influence in the region.⁵² A US-Pakistan-China opposition against India was created at the multilateral level; and surprisingly rendered a deeper dependency on the Soviets for defence capabilities. In this situation, a new strategy was required to bring India forward, which turned out to be a revival of the non-alignment discourse—or renamed later as non-alignment 2.0. As the domestic economic conditions of India were troubled, thus, a comeback for India into the LIO, coupled with the simultaneously decreasing prowess of the USSR was not only a political pathway, but an economic structural inevitability.

The pioneer of economic liberalism for India, before becoming its Prime Minister, was Manmohan Singh as finance minister. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it was almost essential for India to pursue its interests within the framework of the LIO, but with its ambitions to rise as a regional power it was also important for the country to not be clearly seen as siding with the USA. Although the 1990s marked India's integration into globalization, the liberalization policies initiated during this period materialized fully under Man Mohan Singh, making his tenure crucial to understanding India's engagement with LIO. The inevitability of economic liberalism started with the end of the Licence Raj: deregulation of the state-controlled economy, reduction

⁴⁹ S. Ganguly, M.S. Pardesi, "Explaining Sixty Years..."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ H. Kapur, "India's Foreign Policy under Rajiv Gandhi," *The Round Table*, vol. 76, no. 304 (1987), pp. 469-480.

⁵² S. Ganguly, M.S. Pardesi, "Explaining Sixty Years..."

of import taxes, and consequently an opening up of the Indian economy.⁵³ The discourse of renewed non-alignment was also characterized by defence agreements with Italy, South Africa, the UK, and the USA.⁵⁴ The decades of the 1990s and early 2000s for India in the 'American-led' liberal international order was with few setbacks with the USA regarding nuclear issues, but India's fate with the USA would be sealed by Pakistan with its Kargil incursion in 1999.⁵⁵

When Manmohan Singh became Prime Minister of India in 2004, the revival of the non-alignment approach started to take a new form. The structure of non-alignment began a systemic change in relation to the principles of an 'American-led' liberal international order. He realized that, in an interdependent and interconnected world, benefiting from it would be crucial for India's sustenance and growth.⁵⁶ Thus, non-alignment 2.0 started with the same focus, suggesting an equitable and balanced management of interdependence between nations. The political and economic liberalism characterized by international institutionalism in the LIO was taken by India as a foundation to forward the reformation and representation of the United Nations Security Council, and inclusion of India in it.⁵⁷ The non-alignment 2.0 discourse had values emanating from the contemporary LIO which were leveraged by India in its advocacy for the democratization of the global governance process and steering toward a new global polity.

With economic reforms in place for India which boosted the economy into a 'rising' one, along with nuclear prowess, non-alignment 2.0 aided the country to call for and lead by the ideas of inclusive globalization after the effects of hyperglobalization. Non-alignment 2.0 provided India with the space and morale to urge the cultural harmony of civilizations—to what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the 14th NAM Summit in Havana (2006) referred to as a *confluence of civilization*.⁵⁸ Moreover, this strategic discourse represented an expression of India's actions on global anti-terrorism, nuclear disarmament, environmental sustainability, and energy security. Through non-alignment 2.0, India utilized this platform in supporting democratic and pluralistic order in different parts of the world.⁵⁹ This led India to be recognized as a strong, respected, and credible voice.

⁵³ R. Majumdar, "Manmohan Singh and Reformation: Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization," in R. Majumdar (ed.), *Concise History of Indian Economy: Perspectives on Economy and International Relations, 1600s to 2020s*, London 2023, pp. 183-198.

⁵⁴ C.R. Mohan, "The Re-Making of Indian Foreign Policy," *International Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1-2 (2009), pp. 147-163.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ S. Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C. 2016.

⁵⁷ C.R. Mohan, "The Re-Making of Indian..."

⁵⁸ "Statement by the Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh at The XIVth Summit of The Non-Aligned Movement, Havana, Cuba," *Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India*, 15 September 2006, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2320/Statement+by+the+Prime+Minister+of+India+Dr+Manmohan+Singh+at+The+XIVth+Summit+Of+The+NonAligned+Movement+Havana+Cuba>, 27 November 2024.

⁵⁹ S. Tripathi, *India's Foreign Policy Dilemma over Non-Alignment 2.0.*, Thousand Oaks 2020.

In the latter days of Singh's prime ministership, the non-alignment 2.0 narrative was employed by India to argue not only for the reform of the United Nations Security Council but also the Bretton Woods institutions voicing its own and developing countries' concerns about global trade, finance, and development.⁶⁰ This strategy aided India to engage more with African nations comprehending their importance in the global politics in the future, as well as embarking on a 'Look East' policy to engage with the South-East and East Asian economies.⁶¹ The same strategic discourse has been invoked when declaring India as the 'net security provider' of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁶² This has helped India to enhance its aspiration through the IOR to expand its reach to the Pacific Ocean. These applications of non-alignment 2.0 or a renewed non-aligned policy have been reflective of how the LIO has provided India with politico-economic liberal mechanisms and international institutionalism. There has been a two-way road with India's strategic narratives and the LIO, as the narrative supports the liberal order, and reciprocally, the order acts as a platform for the narrative to function.

India, through its non-alignment 2.0 approach, economically excelled within LIO premises. Under Prime Minister Singh, the foreign exchange reserves of the country swelled radically, the commercialization of infrastructural projects involving the private sector was possible, and the growth rate of GDP hit an average of more than 8% annually, with comparatively reduced rates of poverty and employment.⁶³ India became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and along with support from the IMF, the country capitalized on the economic crisis and infrastructural growth.⁶⁴ India even embraced some bilateral trade agreements and regional initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Agreement and expressed interest in an India-Asian Free Trade Agreement (FTA).⁶⁵ The improved relations with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) pushed India into a new league in the LIO.⁶⁶ This was only possible with India's circumstantial position moulded by the liberal international order on the one hand, but conversely, the non-alignment 2.0 strategy facilitating India's positive engagement within the LIO politically and economically.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ L. Mehrotra, "India's Look East Policy: Its Origin and Development," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75-85.

⁶² S. Tripathi, *India's Foreign Policy Dilemma...*

⁶³ R. Majumdar, "Manmohan Singh and Reformation...".

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ S. Tripathi, *India's Foreign Policy Dilemma...*

NARENDRA MODI'S STRATEGIC SHIFT TO 'STRATEGIC AUTONOMY': FINDING ALTERNATIVES WITHIN THE LIO

Recently, a strategic shift can be observed in Indian foreign policy discourse and practices—an enterprising effort to strategically engage in global affairs to pursue its interests, which is different from any previous non-alignment approaches. This shift has been captured in the term 'strategic autonomy'.⁶⁷ While the concept of strategic autonomy has been present in Indian foreign policy discourse since the 1990s, often framed as a natural extension of non-alignment in a post-Cold War world, its most comprehensive and pragmatic articulation has been observed during Narendra Modi's tenure.⁶⁸ Earlier references to strategic autonomy primarily existed in expert debates and official statements, but it was under Modi that the concept materialized into a distinct and action-oriented foreign policy approach.⁶⁹ This approach has enabled India to balance strategic intersections with major powers and be non-aligned at the same time.⁷⁰ As an Asian giant, India has interests, intersections and disparities with other countries that are increasingly initiating both cooperation and conflicts.⁷¹ While strategic autonomy has historical antecedents, its most tangible and consequential application as a guiding framework for Indian foreign policy has taken shape in PM Modi's tenure, distinguishing it from earlier iterations. By adoption of a policy of strategic autonomy, India equips it with tools through which it can deny or avoid certain strategically and politically risky situations.⁷²

The origin of this terminology arises with a changing LIO, especially due to emerging multipolarity. India, along with many other countries in different parts of the world, have drastically strengthened themselves in all dimensions compared to a decade ago. The political and economic liberal values and practices with institutional primacy of international kinds conditioned by the 'America-led' LIO is the foundation on which several novel balances are being sought and intermittently achieved—including for India. This is what the Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar described at the Raisina Roundtable in Tokyo as *volatility that we currently characterize as the global order*.⁷³ The concept of strategic autonomy lays out a path for navigating an increas-

⁶⁷ S.K. Aryal, M.J. Pulami, "India's 'Strategic Autonomy' and Strengthening Its Ties with the US," *Przełąd Geopolityczny*, vol. 44 (2023), pp. 116-128.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ M. Tikerpuu, "Making India's Idea of Strategic Autonomy Simple: Non-Aligned Movement Revisited," *East-West Studies*, vol. 9 (2018), at <http://publications.tlu.ee/index.php/eastwest/article/view/769>, 28 November 2024.

⁷¹ C. Vinodan, A.L. Kurian, "Strategic Autonomy and India's Hedging Policies in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2024), pp. 475-495.

⁷² M. Tikerpuu, "Making India's Idea..."

⁷³ "List of Outcomes: Official Visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Russia," *Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India*, 9 July 2024, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37941/List-of-outcomes+Official+visit+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+to+Russia>, 28 November 2024.

ingly uncertain and unpredictable world by intensifying partnerships with like-minded partners on the basis of LIO principles.⁷⁴ Also, the LIO in the 21st century is shaped by economic and technological concentrations having major strategic implications.⁷⁵ Thus, to deal with unprecedented competition in these realms, India has been obliged to seek new partners through strategic alignment.⁷⁶ Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic caused insecurity among countries in different dimensions as well. Overall, the changing global order to multipolarity and growing challenges to it have made it necessary for India to adapt to the changes via strategic autonomy.⁷⁷

India's quest for an alternative can be clearly observed through its actions in the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)⁷⁸. This quest cannot be seen as a challenge to the LIO in general, except when branding the order as 'American-led'. This pursuit is prompted by those aspects of the present order which had created conditions required for the emerging states to pursue alternatives. Although India and others have signalled a search for alternatives, the existing Westphalian system of states and new multilateral platforms formed for the purpose are based on liberal international institutionalism, thus making the LIO self-perpetuating in nature and allowing India to capitalize on the same for its benefits. In this context, the policy of strategic autonomy aids rising India to preserve and promote a rule-based international order. As rising powers require a rule-based order for influence, India has more incentives to be a stakeholder of a potentially reformed LIO.

Furthermore, India via strategic autonomy has placed itself into this competitive quest for an alternative LIO in such a position that it could benefit from it as a part of a global risk-taking trend that has increased. India's calculated balancing act in the Russia-Ukraine war illustrates how its adherence to strategic autonomy enables it to capitalize on its interests. India's dramatic increase in securing energy supplies from Russia stimulated much conjecture in the West as to whose side the country was on in the war.⁷⁹ Similarly, Prime Minister Modi visited Russia in July 2024 and concluded nine bilateral agreements.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, his three meetings with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sought to signal India's commitment to global peace as well as

⁷⁴ V. Kukreja, "India in the Emergent Multipolar World Order: Dynamics and Strategic Challenges," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 1 (2020), pp. 8-23.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ S.K. Aryal, *India and Central Asia in the Post-Cold War Era: Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural Dimensions*, London 2025.

⁷⁸ J. Kirton, M. Larionova, "Contagious Convergent Cumulative Cooperation: The Dynamic Development of the G20, BRICS and SCO," *International Politics* (2022), pp. 1-29.

⁷⁹ B.A. Iqbal, M. Rahman, "BRICS and India in the Light of Russia-Ukraine Crisis: Emerging Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of East Asia & International Law*, vol. 16, (2023), pp. 160-175.

⁸⁰ "Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Raisina Roundtable in Tokyo," *Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India*, 7 March 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37684/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Raisina_Roundtable_in_Tokyo_March_07_2024, 27 November 2024.

avoiding the charges of formal alliances.⁸¹ Also, India is the largest recipient of funding from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)⁸² and the second largest shareholder in the same international financial institution said to be the financing structure to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and an alternative to Bretton Woods Institutions. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi asserted at the 16th Summit in Kazan, that India's participation in BRICS was a necessary balance.⁸³ Therefore, the India way explained through the discourse of strategic autonomy represents the country's pursuit for a modified order but one that is possible within the framework of an LIO. This is confirmed by India's policy within the G-20 group and its summit in New Delhi in 2023.⁸⁴ Despite the differences between India, the Global South and the North on the issue of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Indian leaders strongly rejected the confrontational position, avoided emphasizing the differences, and focused on economic and social issues and granting membership to the African Union group. Therefore, India does not seek to change or question the LIO, but rather to establish itself and the Global South in the structures of the existing order.⁸⁵

India's strategic approach is intended to enable it to leverage the integrating tendencies of LIO to its benefit. Just as Germany and Japan found their appropriate roles and positions in the LIO, India intends to do the same but within a reformed or enhanced LIO. The strategy is intended to utilize the multilateral logic of the LIO to rise in the order. The informal and formal groupings that India is part of helps the country to benefit from LIO principles such as multilateralism or collective governance. The phrase 'multi-engagement,' often applied to Modi's foreign policy, is not contradictory but rather a component of strategic autonomy, which allows India to maintain diverse partnerships without rigid alignment. As India advocates the free, transparent, and equal distribution of the outcomes of globalization, strategic autonomy provides it with the opportunities to achieve these. Though the Anglo-American model of development of progress has been salient, Modi's articulation of strategic autonomy reflects India's recognition of multipolarity and its need to engage with various power centers while preserving its independent agency; and India through its all-round engagement can lead alternative models and ideologies collectively with other rising states in the scaffolding of the present-day LIO. Therefore, India's strategic autonomy policy has contributed

⁸¹ K. Singh, G. Sen, "The Compulsions and Challenges of Indian Strategic Autonomy Amid the Russia-Ukraine War," *South Asian Voices*, 14 October 2024, at <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-c-in-n-india-ukraine-russia-strategic-autonomy-10-14-2024/>, 26 November 2024.

⁸² "Our Projects," *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*, 2024, at <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/list/index.html>, 27 November 2024.

⁸³ "Building Blocks: On the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan," *The Hindu*, 25 October 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/%E2%80%8Bbuilding-blocks-on-the-16th-brics-summit-in-kazan/article68791862.ece>, 27 November 2024.

⁸⁴ "G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration," *Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India*, 9 September 2023, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37084/G20+New+Delhi+Leaders+Declaration>, 27 November 2024.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

to a quest for an alternative LIO—meaning a reformed, enhanced, and expanded LIO considering the changing nature of world order, especially to multipolarity—which is upholding non-aligned tenets and at the same time supplementing other Indian narratives, such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam* and *Vishwa Guru*.

CONCLUSION

India's positioning within the liberal international order (LIO) showcases an evolving strategy that combines pragmatic alignment with a quest to strengthen security and fulfil its great power aspirations. However, great power was not understood in terms of territorial expansion, but in terms of recognizing India as one of the pillars of the multipolar liberal international order. India did not aspire to create a new, alternative order. From the very beginning, it believed that its role in the world should be recognized by other countries and powers. As pointed out by K.C. Pant, former defence minister of India, member of the Indian People's Party, there was a consensus among the political and strategic elites in India in this regard.⁸⁶ This approach, as traced through various leadership phases, reflects India's action to both engage with and subtly distance itself from a hitherto Western-dominated LIO. Prime Minister Nehru's articulation of non-alignment provided a moral foundation for India's international stance, distinguishing it from the Cold War bloc politics and advocating a sovereignty-centric model, appealing especially to post-colonial states. Subsequent leaders built on this foundation, with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi adapting the discourse to accommodate a more realist and regionally assertive policy, underscoring a delicate balance between global commitments and national interests. Each iteration of India's rhetoric and practice reflects a continuous but flexible engagement with liberal principles, situating India as both a beneficiary and a cautious participant within the LIO.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's era introduced a revived 'non-alignment 2.0' approach, which, combined with economic liberalization, redefined India's participation in the global economic and political order. His focus on liberalization enabled India to leverage the LIO's economic frameworks, while non-alignment 2.0 provided a pathway to articulate an interdependence-focused vision for global cooperation. This approach underscored India's role as a proponent of democratized global governance, supporting institutional reforms and advocating equitable representation for emerging economies within international institutions. However, the subsequent shift towards 'strategic autonomy' under Prime Minister Narendra Modi marks India's latest policy evolution, aligning its interests with multipolar trends while exploring partnerships with like-minded states. Modi's vision for India integrates the LIO's principles with India's own civilizational ethos, signalling India's dual role as both a stakeholder and an architect within an increasingly multipolar order.

⁸⁶ K.C. Pant, "Philosophy of Indian Defence," *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 5 (1989), p. 486.

Considering India's approach to LIO over more than 70 years, four main constants can be identified in this approach:

- a) India's emphasis that the determinant of the independence of a given country is autonomy in making decisions in international relations; formal and institutionalized alliances and blocs were therefore opposed;
- b) fear of dual-bloc rivalry and confrontation between superpowers; India realized both during the Cold War and after its end that the intensification of relations between the US and the USSR, or in the second decade of the 21st century between the US and China, and bipolarism limited the influence of countries such as India; they are then marginalized; it was during periods of relaxation, e.g. in the 1970s, the second half of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 21st century, that India gained the most in the context of its position and role, also in international institutions;
- c) the third feature is related to points a) and b), it is: referring, after Rohan Mukherjee, to the model of Isaiah Berlin, that India perceives strategic autonomy in terms of positive liberty, i.e. the freedom to pursue certain goals.⁸⁷ The specificity of India lies in the fact that it presents the issues of international relations through the prism of its aspirations, identity and strategic culture. India is reluctant to enter into formal alliances with stronger states, fearing that it will find itself in a secondary or subordinate position⁸⁸;
- d) for India, the priority issues are security and development, and this requires stability and striving to maintain the status quo and balance. During the Cold War, India was aware of its internal limitations and realized that instability and conflicts were not good for it. It seems that this element became even more visible after the end of the Cold War. India, which, along with China, is seen as the greatest beneficiary of globalization, sought to maintain the balance of power and stability in the region. The Liberal International Order encourages moderate and responsible behaviour. Given its position and role in the world, India has always been disinclined to make risky and unpredictable decisions. Both Indian leaders and strategic elites agree that preferences and goals do not have to be conflict-generating.

The constant elements in the Indian approach to the LIO and the goals associated with it are the best exemplification of the assumptions of defensive realism. States, striving to ensure security, are not interested in conflicts. Moreover, they are open to cooperation, even in the case of competition with other entities. Therefore, India's perception of the liberal order at both the regional and global levels should be made through the prism of the assumptions of defensive realism and the thesis of absolute benefits, which refers to the assumptions of institutional neoliberalism.

Although the goals remained largely unchanged in India's approach to LIO, there were two significant changes:

⁸⁷ R. Mukherjee, "Chaos as Opportunity: The United States and World Order in India's Grand Strategy," *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2020), p. 429; I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford 1969.

⁸⁸ R. Mukherjee, "Chaos as Opportunity...", p. 429.

- a) India's foreign policy instruments in the context of its involvement in the LIO;
- b) the degree of integration of India with the LIO.

Considering the five elements identifying the LIO, indicated by D. Deudney, J. Ikenberry and R. Alcaro, the following phases, relating to the periodization of integration, and India's involvement in the LIO can be distinguished:

- a) the period of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi—was limited to the criterion of interconnected security, but mainly in the global sphere (security co-binding—USSR, the issue of veto guarantee in the case of Kashmir) and, to a lesser extent, institutionalism (selective recognition of norms and rules) and internationalism (selective—limited to Southern countries, socialist countries); India did not play a key role in the regional security system during this period; India and South Asia were on the periphery of the regional and global security system; similarly, it participated to a limited extent in international regimes and did not play a key role in the Asian or world economy;
- b) The Manmohan Singh period—the systemic integration of India with the liberal international order; India was no longer just a passive participant, but was becoming an active actor. Until 2014, this mainly concerned economic issues and regionalism, with India becoming a responsible economic power (especially after the crisis of 2009, when its role increased). This was also reflected in the increase in free trade zone agreements in the region;
- c) Narendra Modi's period—full integration and active participation not only in the economic dimension, but also in the political and strategic dimension. An example is relations with the USA.⁸⁹ Moreover, during the post-pandemic period, India's regional strategy is closely linked to the global dimension of its politics. India began to consider its strategy in the region in the context of not only the democratic, liberal regional order, but more broadly, the global order. These activities are in line with the assumptions of neoliberalism, which emphasizes that *states practice norm/rule-building to constrain other states behaviour*.⁹⁰

The war in Ukraine and India's ambivalent position, especially in the initial phase of the war, did not change this situation. It even made India's role in world politics more visible and highlighted the interdependencies between security in the Euro-Atlantic region and the Indo-Pacific. The war in Ukraine proves that the role of the Global South and India has significantly increased.⁹¹ This Indian foreign policy posture, to which some have critiqued, is the testimony of strategic autonomy. It could be seen as defecting the paths of traditional LIO, however, it represents an independent and positive

⁸⁹ J. Zajączkowski, "The United States in India's Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region since 2014," *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2021), pp. 107-130.

⁹⁰ K. He, "Institutional Balancing and International Relations Theory: Economic Interdependence and Balance of Power Strategies in Southeast Asia," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2008), p. 493.

⁹¹ S. Shidore, "The Return of the Global South: Realism, Not Moralism, Drives a New Critique of Western Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 27 February 2024, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/return-global-south-critique-western-power>, 27 November 2024.

liberal character of India deflecting rivalries between powers and prioritizing its interest—a clear indication of India's pursuit for an alternative LIO.⁹²

Referring to the theoretical model of George Tsebelis about the so-called actors with veto rights (veto-player status)⁹³ one can formulate a thesis that India has achieved the status of a veto-player, not only in the economic dimension, but also in the political and security dimension. However, it must be clearly emphasized that India is not a revisionist power and will not seek to change the international order. We should agree with Patryk Kugiel that India will strive for fuller participation in the current LIO order and instrumental use of it to strengthen its role and position in international relations. Moreover, they will want to reform the institutions of the current LIO in order to play a greater role in it. In his study, Kugiel gives examples of India's approach and its participation in six international institutions and regimes, i.e.: global governance institutions (mainly in the field of reform of the UN, IMF and World Bank); trade regime (WTO); non-proliferation regime (NPT and NSG); climate protection regime (cooperation within international climate negotiations); the regime for the protection of human rights and democracy (cooperation in the promotion of democracy and human rights); the regime of international development cooperation (cooperation in creating the architecture and principles of development assistance).⁹⁴

In combining the foundational liberal values of the LIO with its unique strategic approaches, India has carved out a role that supports both its aspirations and those of the broader global south. This layered approach, as the paper illustrates, does not signify an outright challenge to the LIO but rather a nuanced participation that advocates for a reformed, inclusive liberal order accommodating diverse pathways to cooperation. This shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy underscores India's resilience and adaptability, strategically positioning itself within LIO structures without becoming wholly subsumed by Western norms. As India continues to advocate a rule-based, multipolar world, its distinctive approach reflects both a continuity with its foundational ideals and an astute response to contemporary geopolitical complexities, reaffirming its commitment to a re-envisioned, pluralistic liberal order.

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⁹² R. Mukherjee, "Chaos as Opportunity...".

⁹³ G. Tsebelis, "Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism and Multipartyism," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1995), pp. 289-325.

⁹⁴ P. Kugiel, *Unia Europejska w polityce zagranicznej Indii*, PhD Thesis, Warszawa 2024.

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