

## **The India-NATO Council and the Tri-Polar World**

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A post-Covid Postscript

This paper, which outlines the strategic need for a qualitatively new type of large-scale Western World and India cooperation, was drafted and submitted for publication well before the modern world had any inkling of today's Covid-19 realities. Recent developments, however, have only proved and underlined that the conclusions made in this paper are even more valid than previously expected. In the meantime, the *EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025* stipulated that the EU and India will: cooperate in the EU-India Joint Working Group to facilitate trade and the removal of obstacles related to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and technical barriers to trade (TBT); continue the regulatory dialogue on pharmaceuticals and medical devices, notably via the established EU-India Joint Working Group on pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and medical devices; and work together on health security and pandemic crisis preparedness and response, in particular linked to the COVID-19 outbreak. This is yet further proof that the Western World-India cohesion is a vital necessity for global democracy with the NATO-India Council filling a strategic gap.

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Following the fall of the Berlin Wall 30 years ago, there was expectation that the world would move from being bi-polar to becoming unipolar. Today's geopolitical realities prove that there are again two poles, albeit less focused and less magnetic: the Western pole anchored in Washington-Brussels, and around the NATO/EU; and the Eastern pole around Moscow-Beijing, which is increasingly being structured via BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO.

The question in this context is: Quo Vadis, India?

Bearing in mind both India's heritage as founder of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and its ambitions to join the P5—the Permanent UNSC members, India needs innovative solutions. The Government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in its second term, seems to have the imagination, capacity, and the opportunity to do so.

India is a founding member of BRICS, as well as a member of the SCO since 2017, which goes beyond its non-aligned tradition. The continuing development of India's Space and

Nuclear programs is a clear sign that the country is on its way of becoming a true great power in a sensitive part of the world, and in particular – to be officially recognised as a nuclear power.

One big move which India — the world’s largest democracy— could make to position itself as a player proportional to its size is to position itself as the Third Geo-Pole. To do so, there is a simple step to undertake: to establish a regular and visible dialogue—to establish a bond—with the second biggest democratic entity on the globe, i.e., NATO. This could start with formalising an India-NATO Council (INC), as a discussion forum, to brainstorm a bilateral agenda and a better future for humanity. The INC would be grounded on solid logic, not just opportunities for both sides. India and all NATO members together hold one-third of the world’s total population. NATO and India share common values and the interest to protect them. At the same time, they have shared concerns vis-a-vis common security and economic challenges as well as competitors and threats. The areas where the two sides need to communicate are boundless: the Earth, the Poles, the Nukes, Space, Cyber Space and 5G, among others.

The INC will upgrade India’s ties with the three NATO members of the P5, while India already has links with the other two through BRICS. Thus, India could play a unique role by having separate security arrangements with all of the P5. This will de facto transform India into the Third Geo-Pole which, among other reasons, strengthens its case for permanent membership to the UN Security Council.

NATO, for its part, will gain new credibility and political strength amongst the formidable group of India supporters in the UN and the former Non-Aligned Movement.

Ten years ago, when the Atlantic Club first launched the idea for creating the INC, it was a non-starter. Recent indications from New Delhi, Brussels and Washington show an evolution of thinking both in India and the West. There is a palpable wind of change that could, perhaps, open a window of opportunity.

Where is the EU in this equation?

The US today reportedly has more military exercises with India than with many of its NATO allies. In February 2020, US President Donald Trump announced US\$3 billion worth of sales of US military equipment to India. Therefore, US-India security ties are progressing well outside of the context of NATO. The ones that really need NATO for security engagements with India are the European Allies, and the EU, before all else. Therefore, the world needs the commitment of the EU leadership and persuasiveness vis-à-vis NATO for the creation of INC.

To be sure, the INC should be launched in a holistic way with no confrontation with Pakistan, nor with China or third parties with whom the West needs a different communication line, though for different motivations altogether. Neither India, nor the West, could have a stronger and more reliable partner than each other. A world with three poles, two of which are likeminded democracies, will be a substantial improvement from the two-polar one.

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