

India and international organisations: Continuing the pursuit of Great Power status

David Scott assesses India's interactions with various regional and global organisations and considers which Modi will prioritise as he continues the drive for Great Power status.



This post forms part of a new series on the India At LSE blog, India's Foreign Relations Under Modi. Click [here](#) to see more posts.

Under Modi, India's attitude and role in international organisations will most likely continue to reflect a drive for Great Power status, an ingrained stress on "strategic autonomy", and mixed regional competition and global cooperation with China.

With regard to India's immediate neighbourhood, the [South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation](#) (SAARC) has to date proved of limited success, and Modi will need to decide how much energy to put into galvanising the organisation. His invitation to other SAARC leaders to attend his inauguration in May 2014 suggested he might be so inclined. However, China's push for SAARC entry is something that India is likely to be reluctant over. India's efforts may instead go into galvanising [BIMSTEC](#) as a useful bridgehead to Southeast Asia, given that BIMSTEC membership is the same as SAARC minus a problematic Pakistan but plus Myanmar.

Modi might look to India's maritime neighbourhood and put more energy into revitalising the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#). However, its economic potential remains largely unrealised. Consequently, Modi may find the [Indian Ocean Naval Symposium](#) a more practical *Look South* focus, especially as China is not a member. Such maritime levers for presence and influence may also be reflected in Modi active pushing the [IBSA](#) mechanism with South Africa and Brazil; a self-avowedly South-South democratic grouping which does not involve China, and which has already initiated trilateral naval exercises since 2008.

Within India's *extended neighbourhood*, the already strong *Look East* economic links with the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) look set to have the January 2010 free trade agreement in "goods" complemented by agreement in "services and investments" at the India-ASEAN summit in December 2014. Greater India-ASEAN security cooperation, especially on the maritime front, beckons for Modi. India's decision to join in the [RIMPAC](#) exercises off Hawaii in summer 2014 may also be the signal for India to push from observer to membership status of the [West Pacific Naval Symposium](#). Meanwhile, the [ASEAN Regional Forum](#) and the [East Asia Summit](#) bring Indian involvement in East Asia, but in a subdued fashion. There, it remains to be seen how far Modi will make India's voice heard, and what his message there over China will be.

It also remains to be seen how far Modi will push for membership of the [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation](#) (APEC) organisation. There are already indications that India's long-standing request for membership is moving forward with the invitation from the host, China, for India to attend the APEC summit in November 2014. Another decision for Modi is whether to maintain India's initial interest in setting up the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) that does not include the United States but does have China, or whether to change direction and seek membership of a [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) that has the US as a member but does not have China. One clear development is India's admittance in 2015 as a full member to the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), which will strengthen India's *Look North* outreach to an energy-rich Central Asia, amid some unofficial competition with China.

Further afield are questions of India's relations with the European Union (EU) and with the North Atlantic Organisation (NATO). With regards to the EU, the *strategic partnership* formally announced in 2004 has not been translated into much tangible action. Climate change cooperation, anti-terrorism cooperation and conclusion of free trade negotiations remain the three most important issues facing Modi in India-EU relations.

However India continues to see the EU as a weak political partner given the foreign policy limitations of the EU. As to NATO, interest has been somewhat limited because India's significant security relations with the US and France operate at a bilateral level. A way forward to strengthen India-NATO institutional links would be to upgrade the existing Track-2 (unofficial) dialogue process with Track-1.5 (unofficial-official) or Track-1 (official) formats. A formal *Partnership Agreement* between India and NATO is a possibility; echoing such arrangements already in existence between NATO and other designated "global partners" like Pakistan and Japan. On the one hand, the EU and (post-Afghanistan) NATO focus on Europe and the Mediterranean is of little geopolitical significance to India. On the other hand, in the Gulf of Aden, the EU's *Operation Atalanta* and NATO's *Operation Ocean Shield* parallel India's own naval deployments, and could be the focus for their closer security cooperation with India.



Various non-Western forums for India are the **RIC** (Russia, India, China), **BRICS** (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and **BASIC** (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) formations. RIC presents a political trilateral, BRICS focuses on economics, and BASIC focuses on environmental matters. One significance in these three formations for India is that they all involve China alongside India and in different ways represent implicit critiques to Western political leadership of the international system. This was perhaps indicated in the decision in September 2014 by BRICS to set up a New Development Bank (NDB), based in Shanghai with an Indian as its President. India may continue to push for greater influence through greater contributions and voting rights in global mechanisms like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but the NDB may serve as a more attractive venue for India?

Politically, the biggest organisational issue for India remains its long established **long established desire** for a Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council. Previously obstructed by Beijing, this will be an issue for Modi to pursue with China. Such an issue returns us to India's drive for recognition as a Great Power.

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