

Associate Paper

10 November 2020

Modi, Macron, and a Multipolar World Order

Patrick Triglavcanin

FDI Associate

Key Points

- The beheading of a French school teacher has ignited a diplomatic feud between France and India on one side, and Pakistan and Turkey on the other.
- In light of new security agreements with the United States, notably the Basic Exchange and Co-operation Agreement, India may be inclined to utilise the situation to push back against Turkey and Pakistan and, subsequently, China.
- Insights from the new book, *The Indian Way*, by India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, shed light on India's decision-making process and lend to the conclusion that New Delhi is more prepared to fight for its national interests, but also remains committed to fostering an international arena for all.
- The developments resulting from the teacher's murder highlight the multipolar state of the international system and how some countries interact with it.

Summary

The reactions of France, India, Turkey and Pakistan to the killing of Samuel Paty, a French middle-school teacher, are characteristic of regional powers interacting in a multipolar world. These countries are utilising the situation to acquire advantages where achievable, and the implications of M. Paty's killing extend far beyond the streets of Paris.

Analysis

In early October, Samuel Paty showed his class cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed from *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine, during a class on freedom of speech and expression. Such cartoons have led to violence across the globe previously and resulted in [attacks](#) on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters, but Paty, who had run the class before, was confident that France's secular nature and traditions would allow for their viewing and subsequent discussion. It is no surprise that these cartoons insulted many of his Muslim pupils and their parents due to their irreverent nature. Paty's murder, nonetheless, is unquestionably unjustifiable and worrisome for the French objective of educating all children as tolerant free-thinkers who possess the ability to analyse and critique all aspects of society, including religion.

French President Emmanuel Macron sees secularism as sacrosanct to French society and his [response](#) that France would not 'renounce the caricatures' underlines that belief. Macron also commented on the Islamic faith in his defence of secularism in France, [stating](#) that: 'Islam is a religion that is experiencing a crisis across the world', in reference to the violent jihadism of Islamic State and the austere Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia, both being strands of political Islam. Macron then went one step further, [declaring](#) that France does not 'believe in political Islam that is not compatible with stability and peace in the world.'

No matter how one perceives those comments, it is evident that they have offended the Muslim population at large, as they are said to display a naïve understanding of the distinctions within the Islamic faith and its majority, non-violent believers. Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, [castigated](#) Macron for his comments, questioning his mental health and labelling him a Western "crusader" launching an offensive on believers. That is ironic, coming as it did from a leader who once [recited](#) a poem that said in part, "The minarets are our bayonets, the mosques are our barracks, the believers are our soldiers." Pakistan then got involved, with Prime Minister Imran Khan condemning Macron's comments as divisive and Islamophobic in a [twitter thread](#). After Khan's comments, India weighed in on the side of France, with the Ministry of External Affairs issuing an [official statement](#) supporting Macron and deploring the language that has been used against him.

These developments are unsurprising and go beyond the murder of Paty. Franco-Turkish relations have been deteriorating for some time now as they clash heads over the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, and Macron sees Turkey's inclusion in NATO as a hindrance to the organisation's moral clarity, deeming it contentious whether Turkey would defend, or even subscribe to, Western values. This dysfunctional relationship, paired with Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman philosophy and desire to be seen as the leader of the Muslim world, informs the Turkish President's scathing remarks against Macron and willingness to engage in this opportunity, as it portrays him as the protector of Muslims in the face of blasphemy and diminishes the international standing of France, a strategic rival. Pakistan's support for Turkey is also predictable, as it is a Muslim-majority state that sees an opportunity for foreign investment and diplomatic support in Erdoğan's pan-Islamist vision. Khan also sees Turkey as an important player in ending India's human rights abuses directed at Muslims in

Kashmir and bringing peace to Afghanistan, both of which are vital interests to Islamabad. Thus, remaining close to Turkey is of great importance to Pakistan.

It is India's decision to wade into this feud that raises the stakes. Indo-Pakistani relations have been acrimonious ever since the partition of British India in 1947, which split the Indian sub-continent down religious lines and birthed the quarrel over Kashmir as well as complications relating to religious tolerance and cross-border terrorism, complications that persist to this day. Turkey's decision to condemn India's abrogation of Article 370 of its Constitution in late 2019 – which had given Jammu and Kashmir special status and a degree of autonomy – was done to solidify the Turko-Pakistani allegiance and was met with vexation in New Delhi, which sees the status of Jammu and Kashmir as an innately Indian issue to resolve. Siding with Paris is thus an opportunity for India to push back against Pakistan and Turkey.

It is also an opportunity for India to push back, where necessary, against China. Relations between the two great Asian powers have deteriorated rapidly since April due to a re-ignition of hostilities along India and China's ill-defined 3,440-kilometre border. Tensions have culminated in the Ladakh region and a [skirmish](#) broke out in June that resulted in casualties on both sides. Beijing and New Delhi blame each other as the instigator and are now locked in an '[infrastructure arms-race](#)' that is seeing both powers double down on their efforts in the region by building strategic posts near the contested areas. China was also in accord with Turkey and Pakistan in condemning India's abrogation of Article 370.

Turkey and Pakistan are both China's allies. Beijing's ties to Pakistan, which are problematic for New Delhi, play an instrumental role in the success of China's Belt and Road Initiative; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is regularly cited as the "crown-jewel" of the initiative as it will provide Beijing with strategically important naval ports and energy pipelines, as well as developing China's restive north-western province of Xinjiang. There are currently fifteen thousand troops from the Pakistani Army guarding Chinese workers on the CPEC as a result of [attacks](#) on those same workers coming from insurgents in Balochistan, where India is believed to be active.

Fomenting unrest in Turkey and Pakistan, particularly the latter, thus provides India with another way of pushing back against what it deems aggressive Chinese tactics. But is this opportunity, in this iteration, one that New Delhi will take? In light of tightening security arrangements between New Delhi and Washington it is entirely possible. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, was revived in 2017 after ten years of dormancy. This strategic forum brings together Australia, India, Japan and the US to discuss security issues in the Indo-Pacific and is, at least in part, about containing China. Bilateral relations between India and the US have also strengthened; the US eclipsed China as India's largest trading partner in 2019 and Modi was welcomed with open arms by 50,000 Indian-Americans at a "Howdy, Modi" rally in Texas in September 2019. More noteworthy is the [Basic Exchange and Co-operation Agreement \(BECA\)](#), signed between the US and India on 27 October at the India-US 2+2 meeting. The BECA gives New Delhi access to US global geospatial maps, something which will enhance the accuracy of Indian cruise and ballistic missiles targeting, say, Pakistan, China or other targets in the Himalayas. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also

affirmed the US commitment to India in, among other things, countering Chinese aggression, as he [stated at the meeting](#):

Our leaders, and our citizens, see with increasing clarity, that the CCP is no friend to democracy, the rule of law, transparency, nor to freedom of navigation, the foundation of a free and open and prosperous Indo-Pacific. I am glad to say that the United States and India are taking steps to strengthen co-operation against all manner of threats and not just those posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

Whether those comments are unnecessarily inflammatory or justified is debatable, but what is for certain is that the US stance on China is hardening, as is its commitment to Indo-Pacific powers which are seemingly under threat by, and willing to resist, the Chinese Communist Party.

The fact that the US is now a de facto ally to India could embolden New Delhi to take action against states that it believes subvert its national interests. Such a possibility is detailed in Indian Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's, recent book, *The Indian Way*, in which he outlines the need for 'Indian policymakers to ... assess the merits of more realism in their approach to world affairs' (p. 19). Jaishankar also refers to the Sino-Indian war of 1962 as a tragic policy failure due to India's misunderstanding of power, a failure that could be repeated if India does not vigilantly assess recent developments. New Delhi has also recently displayed its willingness to throw its weight around, whether that be [economically](#) or [militarily](#).

Such aggression would, nonetheless, incur costs for New Delhi; costs that it may be unwilling to sustain. Jaishankar's sobering account of China's rise in comparison to that of India underlines the recognition of Chinese power in Indian policy circles, as well as how India, as a global force, will become more potent over time, disincentivising aggression.

The credibility of the US as a defensive ally is also questionable. There is no doubt that the US is still a strong Indo-Pacific power, with enough reach and firepower to go toe-to-toe with the greatest forces in the region. The US is, however, a power in decline and currently marred by domestic complications and the legacy of Donald Trump, which has diminished its moral standing, and other states' confidence in it, across the globe. The jury is still out on whether the Quad will be nothing but, [as put by](#) China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi: 'sea foam ... that will soon dissipate' or a cohesive, strong alliance that acts as a bulwark against malign Chinese actions. Furthermore, China has, through its encroachment on Hong Kong and the waters of the South China Sea, raised doubts about the willingness of the US to use force against it and somewhat demonstrated that the US alliance system is not adequate in responding to Chinese behaviour.

New Delhi and Washington share a broad view of the Indo-Pacific region, yet Washington's "free" and "open" Indo-Pacific differs from New Delhi's vision of a "free", "open", and "inclusive" Indo-Pacific as it includes a place for China and focuses on uncontentious, win-win issues. India is more interested in "managing" China than it is in containing it, and understands the costs of engagement and, more importantly, of opposing China's power.

Reflecting on these developments, it appears that world powers are settling into the multipolar nature of the new world order. States are engaging in a more transactional manner, using international developments to reap gains when they present themselves and forming loose alliances around major concerns that band them together, such as religious affiliations and security. New Delhi has been conducting diplomacy like this for some time now through its policy of non-alignment, which is arguably still alive and well, and it seems that New Delhi's understanding of how to navigate these murky waters may be better than most. To quote Jaishankar again:

How does one reconcile a Howdy Modi gathering with a Mamallapuram or a Vladivostok Summit? Or the RIC (Russia-India-China) with JAI (Japan-America-India)? Or the Quad and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization)? An Iran with the Saudis, or Israel with Palestine? The answer is in a willingness to look beyond dogma and enter the real world of convergences. Think of it as calculus, not just as arithmetic. This new version of world affairs is a challenge for practitioners and analysts alike, but one that must be mastered to forge ahead. (p. 101).

Jaishankar's book was written, however, before the recent border standoff with China, and New Delhi's strategic calculus has undoubtedly changed since then, as it is displaying an increased readiness to push back against China [directly](#), or through punishing Turkey and [Pakistan](#). New Delhi's recent actions can, nonetheless, largely be seen as a manifestation of this understanding of the multipolar nature of the international system and New Delhi's important, yet limited place within it.

Where does Macron fit into all of this? Paty's murder and Macron's response was the catalyst for this diplomatic feud, and it seems that Paris stands to benefit from it through closer ties with New Delhi. Indo-French relations have been deepening for some time, evident through the Indian purchase of French-made [Rafale fighter aircraft](#) and [Scorpène submarines](#) and the successful search-and-rescue operations that the two powers, along with Australia, have [conducted](#) in the Indian Ocean. Perhaps New Delhi sees this recent incident as an opportunity to tighten its security arrangements with Paris, and vice-versa, and if so, likely expects the arrangement to be transactional and centred around security concerns.

The fact that Paty's middle-school class on the freedom of speech and expression resulted in a theatre of diplomatic tensions is difficult to grasp, but not so when one sees the international system for what it is. The US is in relative decline and, as its global clout falls, China's rises. Ankara and Islamabad are capitalising on their existing relations with Beijing to push their agenda where it is safe and beneficial to do so, prompting India to weigh in due to its tenuous relationship with the three powers. It is classic multipolar great-power politics and a trend that will continue for the foreseeable future. Expect more signals, transactional politics and loose coalitions as the powers of the world wrestle with the multipolar nature of the international system and endeavour to find their places within it.

About the Author: Patrick Triglavcanin is studying for the degree of Master of International Relations and National Security at Curtin University.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au