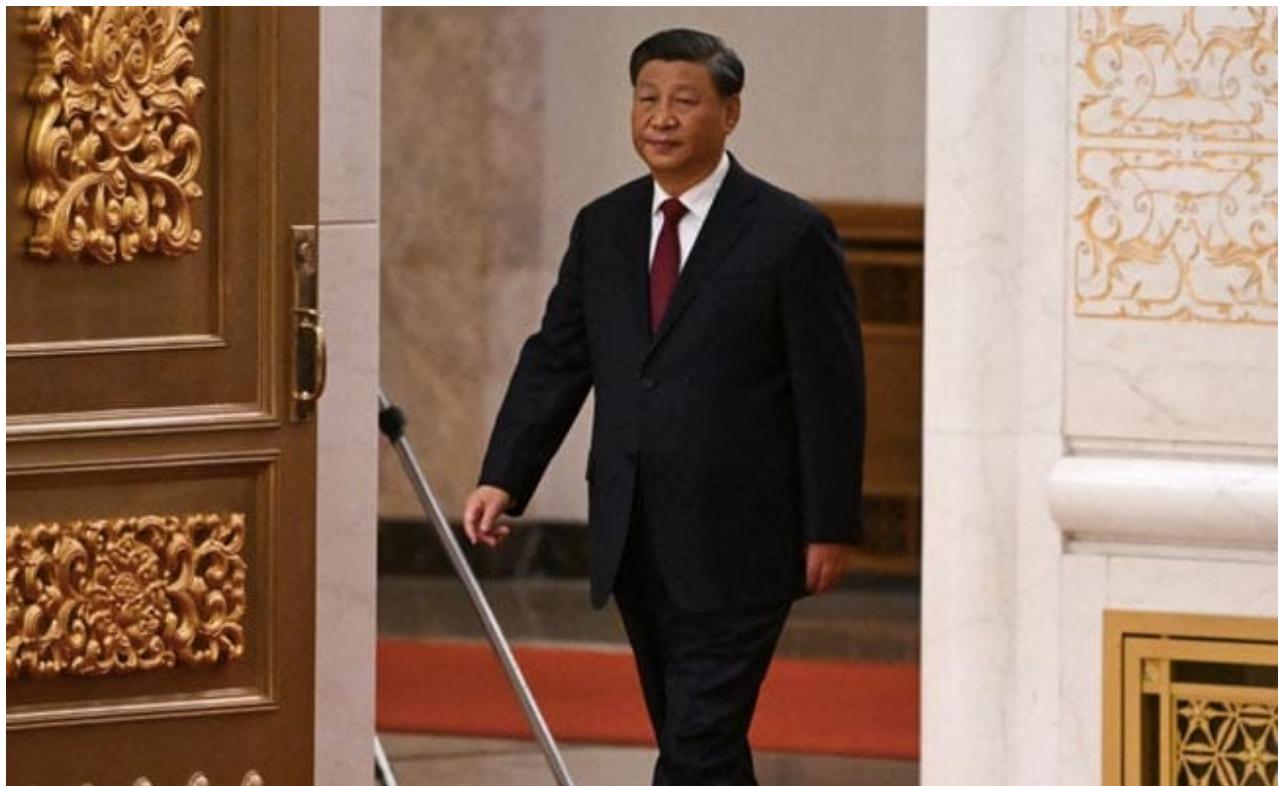


# Opinion: What China Really Thinks Of India's 'Neutrality'

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While the Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union ended in 1991, a reading of how powerful states of the time behaved continues to dictate foreign policy thinking, even in the current epoch of international relations. India and China, both newly independent states in the post-World War II era, lacking adequate economic and political standing in international politics in the 1950s and 1960s, emerged as important voices. India's non-aligned policies, which focused on neutrality between the two power blocs, gained a lot of traction and was seen as an important tool to shield national interests from Cold War dynamics.

China, which was officially "leaning to one side", or to the side of communism led by the USSR, also emerged as an important voice in international politics, as it joined the Korean War in 1950 against the so-called onslaught of capitalist and imperialist forces. At the Bandung conference of Asian-African countries in 1955, where the idea of non-alignment took deeper roots, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's speech was highly appreciated, as he spoke of "seeking common grounds", and "not seeking divergences". Seemingly, India's and China's stands looked alike. A closer reading, however, reveals many differences.

It is worth discussing questions around neutrality as a foreign policy choice in 2023, given that both India and China, once again, have largely chosen diplomatically neutral stances at the UN in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war continues to be discussed at various regional and multilateral forums, and the most recent instance of these discussions was the virtual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) hosted by India. While Russia spoke of the need for a "truly just and multipolar world", China spoke about the need for members to "protect and promote their security and development interests". India spoke about the need to deepen cooperation for sustainable socio-economic development and to improve the well-being and living standards of the people in the SCO region. India also criticised the international scourge of terrorism. What also stands out is the fact that India refused to sign the SCO's economic development strategy for 2030 due to objections over retaining language that echoed Chinese official policies. In essence, India did not sign onto China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is violative of India's sovereignty, among other things.

India's statements at the SCO make it clear that it does not want to be embroiled in the Russia-Ukraine war, but it does want to address the fallout of the crisis on developing countries, including India. This is why New Delhi spoke of how existing conflicts are aggravating and new conflicts are emerging. India's position, particularly on the Ukraine war, is rooted in its time-tested policies of non-alignment, which hinge on neutrality.

India and China, both important movers and shakers in international politics, could have taken the mantle of the developing world together. However, deep divergences in the world views of the two hinder a cooperative approach. In this context, it becomes pertinent to understand what China really thinks of India's neutrality.

Every time a state visit takes place between India and the US, the Chinese media goes overboard emphasising how India has always been neutral and the US is instrumental in driving a wedge between India and China, while completely ignoring the aggressive stance China takes against India in multiple avenues of the bilateral relationship. These statements are found in abundance even after the recent Modi-Biden meeting of 2023.

The bonhomie between India and the US does not work well for China for the simple reason that the two are democracies, have similar systems of governance, and are not revisionist powers. While China touts India's neutrality and says it should stay neutral in all conflicts between the US and China, Beijing does not really think highly of 'neutrality'.

Analyst Pan Guang's recent interview on the role of the SCO, published on the Chinese news website Guancha, mentions India's neutral positions in foreign policy and is an important indicator to understand what China thinks of India's neutrality. Dr. Pan, an SCO practitioner, stated in his interview that he does not think India has fallen into the US orbit, and that India has not explicitly stated that it has shifted to one side - not yet. India, he says, has insisted on having it both ways or "to put it diplomatically... on being nonaligned". The interview in Chinese uses the phrase '*jiao ta liang tiao chuan*' which literally translates into 'traveling in two boats'. However, the concept of traveling in two boats is not what India's non-alignment or neutrality means.

Dr. Pan's use of the phrase is reminiscent of Mao Zedong's statements on India's foreign policy choices during the Cold War. "To sit on the fence is impossible. A third road does not exist," he had said. He had emphasised on the need to either take the side of imperialism or socialism. He had also referred to India's decision to join the commonwealth as a phenomenon where India, like an insecure child, is tied to the apron strings of its colonial masters. Of course, there has never been any attempt from China to understand India's rationale for its foreign policy choices or national interests, and the outdated and incorrect Chinese understanding of India's neutrality permeates from Mao Zedong's times to Xi Jinping's.

We must understand the deep divergences between India and China, and refrain from using any statement or phrase that the Chinese use in international politics, because there simply is a huge breach in Indian and Chinese foreign policy thoughts, as exemplified by the Chinese view on India's choices for neutrality.

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