Political commentators have noted a number of current large-scale trends, which are likely to transform international relations over the coming decades. It is expected that developed countries will see their population decline by up to 25%, and the developing world, the former “third world” will see a corresponding increase in economic might.

Given this tendency, India is attracting a lot of attention: not only has it become a leading participant in the new Space Race, but it has set itself another ambitious goal: to join the select club of leading world powers. The Indian state, and Indian society, can boast of a number of important achievements in recent years, including rapid social and economic development, an increase in living standards, and growth in the science and technology sectors.

“Asia has become the world’s main engine of economic growth. We are in what many are calling Asia’s Century,” Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in 2018.

According to United Nations figures for 2019, India’s population is currently 1.37 billion. Thus, it has the second largest population in the world, after China. And, according to forecasts, India may well overtake China and become the world’s most populous nation within eight years.

The budget presented by Narendra Modi’s new government demonstrates its determination to cut India’s fiscal deficit while boosting spending on infrastructure and social projects. In recent years India has seen annual growth of 7%, more than any other key developing economy. According to the PwC auditors, this year India is set to become the fifth largest global economy overtaking the UK. Based on other accounting criteria, it could even become the number three economy after the USA and China. If it maintains its current steady progress, then within 15 years its GDP will be the same as China’s is now.

But India’s recent ambition to achieve a leading status in international affairs is based on more than just economic indicators. It has started to play an important role in world politics, and its authority as a serious international player is growing, its status as a member of the G20 is established and talks are under way to include India in the G8. India’s relations with the countries that most political observers see as the “leading triangle” of world politics, the USA, Russia and China, are thus of great interest.

As readers may remember, bilateral relations between the USA and India only really got going a relatively short time ago. During the Cold War India was one of the world’s leading non-aligned nations, although it had close links with the USSR, and Washington viewed it with what could be described as “cautious suspicion”. Relations improved in the 1990s, but then took a turn for the worse in 1998, when the USA imposed sanctions on India in response to its nuclear tests.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 US President George W. Bush followed a new policy in relation to India, seeking both to maintain good strategic links with Pakistan (they were essential to the military operations in Afghanistan which formed a core part of his global “War on Terror”) and to find a counterweight to the rapidly growing might of China, which he saw as the most serious challenge to US interests in Asia, and, in the long term, worldwide. It was the latter factor that prompted Washington to seek better relations with India, and in 2006 the two countries signed the Civil Nuclear Agreement, even though India is not a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. This nuclear treaty enabled the two countries to embark on a hitherto unthinkable strategic rapprochement. Certain observers, perhaps rather naively, believe that the USA sees India as playing an
“exceptional” role in the new state of international relations.

Narendra Modi’s diplomatic policy, as it has evolved over several years, can be briefly summarized as follows: India is a unique country and we can remain uninvolved in conflicts between the other world powers (such as the USA, China and Russia) And those closest to the Indian Prime Minister would go still further, and express it like this: India needs to set out its own red lines, to make clear its demands, its concerns and its preferences. India is in fact the only Asian country that can act as a counterweight to China (and not just for the USA) and it cannot be treated like other countries.

Relations between the USA and India have been stagnant for many years. And on the very day when, following his reelection, Narendra Modi began his new term of office, the USA ended India’s de facto most favored nation status and imposed trade tariffs - in effect, US sanctions. And, to judge by a number of US government publications, Washington hoped to see Narendra Modi lose the most recent elections, given the “failure of his economic policies and his departure from core principles that have formed the basis for Indian society since the country’s independence in 1947.”

The current US sanctions are a clear warning that things may get worse in the future. The US’s main complaint relates to Iranian oil: Iran is a neighbor and key partner of India and a participant in several investment projects. But the USA is known to have presented India with a number of other demands: to open up the Indian market to US milk products, lift restrictions on its import of medical equipment and lift all protectionist measures in the area of advanced technology, etc. In effect, the existing relations between the two countries must be completely restructured for the benefit of the USA alone. However, in view of the fact that India is a country in which the workforce increases by 7.5 million people every year, how can it accept all the US’s demands? That would not only represent a failure of Narendra Modi’s ambitious “Make in India” program, and other policies, it would be a disaster for the country as a whole.

In recent months, the above behavior has reinforced the view of the USA as an unreliable partner which seeks to impinge on India’s interests and sovereignty. In the past, such a change in public opinion has been evident every time relations between the USA and India have cooled.

In response, India has followed a policy of making use of the USA’s economic potential to further its own interests, just as it has done with China and Russia: taking the best of what others have to offer without committing itself to an alliance with any of the major world powers. Narendra Modi’s policy is a sign of India’s determination to become the leading nation in the South Asian region, and maintain good relations with its neighbors, including China, and to become a center of advanced technologies while nurturing the unique qualities of its ancient civilization.

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