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## TODAY'S ARTICLES (fill in)

#	Headline / Topic	Source
1	<b>Taking sides in conflict : Delhi's past record tells a complicated story</b>	<b>Indian Express</b>
2	<b>Inside China, authority, conflict and strategic challenges</b>	<b>The Hindu</b>
3	<b>Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025</b>	<b>IDSA</b>
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

# Taking sides in conflict: Delhi's past record tells a complicated story



**RAJA MANDALA**  
BY C RAJA MOHAN

ONE OF the more surprising elements of the unfolding Indian debate on the war in the Middle East is the concern — if not anguish — that India has “tilted to one side” in the current Gulf war. For a section of the commentariat, the essence of Indian foreign policy is, and ought to be, a refusal to take sides in conflicts between other states.

That idea aligns with the traditional notion of neutrality. In the early decades after Independence, however, Delhi has often taken pains to argue that its doctrine of non-alignment was not neutrality. India did not avoid taking positions; rather, it claimed the right to form them on the merits of each issue — based on independent judgement rather than bloc loyalty.

In practice, India's record tells a more complicated story. Delhi has often taken sides — sometimes vehemently, sometimes defensively, and sometimes only implicitly. There have also been moments when India simply flip flopped as governments changed.

It has been relatively easy for India's political and intellectual establishment to adopt strong moral positions when the offender was the United States or the West. This habit was part of what Shashi Tharoor once described as India's tradition of offering a “running moral commentary” on world affairs.

The anti-Western reflex had deeper

roots. Part of it reflected the lingering residue of anti-colonial sentiment. Part of it was grounded in Delhi's genuine Cold War contradictions with Washington — over Pakistan, Kashmir, and nuclear non-proliferation.

India's moral clarity, however, tended to blur when Moscow transgressed norms that India supported. That ambivalence was visible in Delhi's muted response to the Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979), as well as to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its occupation of eastern Ukraine after 2022.

Many would call this hypocrisy. Yet double standards are a universal feature of international life. India's reluctance to criticise Moscow was rooted in the strategic value Delhi attached to the Russian connection in managing its security challenges.

There were, however, brief moments of deviation. When Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, the Charan Singh government took a critical line. That position was consistent with the Janata Party's long-standing critique that Congress foreign policy, while professing non-alignment, was in practice tilted towards Moscow.

But within weeks, Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980 and proved the point. She instructed India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Brajesh Mishra, to abstain on the resolution condemning the Soviet Union.

More tellingly, Indian diplomacy soon began arguing that the Soviet intervention had been necessitated by external interference against the communist government in Kabul. The echo of this reasoning in the widespread refrain in Delhi after 2022 — that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had been “provoked” by the West — is hard to miss.

The transition from Janata to Congress also altered India's posi-

tion on Cambodia. The Janata government had held back from recognising the government installed in Phnom Penh after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Congress reversed that position in 1980, justifying it as part of an effort to balance China in Southeast Asia by supporting Vietnam. Ironically, Cambodia eventually became one of China's strongest Asian partners.

Both choices carried costs. India's reluctance to criticise Soviet actions in Afghanistan damaged its standing in the Islamic world. Endorsing the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia provoked backlash across Southeast Asia. There was an earlier precedent, too.

In 1950, Indian diplomacy actively sought to prevent the United Nations from condemning China's military intervention in the Korean War. Jawaharlal Nehru was then investing heavily in building a partnership with Beijing to construct a new Asian order. That “tilt” towards China in the 1950s also carried costs.

In 1990, Delhi struggled to articulate a credible response to Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait. India avoided condemning the Iraqi action, partly because Saddam was viewed as a “secular” leader in the Middle East who often supported India on issues involving Pakistan. Iraq was also an important source of oil.

Foreign Minister J K Gujral travelled to Baghdad after the invasion to secure Iraq's cooperation in evacuating thousands of Indians stranded in Kuwait. If India's reluctance to defend Kuwait's sovereignty might have lacked a moral basis, it could nonetheless be explained in terms of India's significant equities in Iraq.

For decades, India framed its Middle East policy around two broad contradictions: The US versus the region, and Israel versus the Arabs. But Indian debates paid far less attention to the region's internal rivalries

Arabs. But the Indian debates paid far less attention to the region's internal rivalries — between Arabia and Persia and between conservative monarchies and republican forces (both secular and Islamic) in the Arab world.

Over the decades, those internal contradictions, for example between Gulf Arabs and Iran, have become far more consequential. The Gulf Arab states' reliance on the US for security against various forms of radicalism, and the gradual normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab countries, have altered the regional picture. India's debate, though, appears stuck in the mental maps of the past.

India's current approach to the unfolding war in the Gulf is shaped by the scale of its stakes in the Arabian Peninsula. India today has roughly \$200 billion in trade with the Gulf, depends heavily on the region for energy supplies, and has nearly nine million citizens living and working across the Arab Gulf states. Protecting these interests has become the overriding concern for Delhi in the present crisis. This is not an unreasonable calculation.

Looking ahead, Delhi must operate on the basis of a simple strategic reality: The security and prosperity of India and Arabia are now indivisible. Political support for Arabs was an important principle articulated at the very outset of independent India's foreign policy. Eight turbulent decades later in the Middle East, it has acquired a new meaning — in the form of a deepening interdependence between India and the Gulf Arab states. The current nightmare in the Gulf will eventually end, but managing India's deep interdependence with the Arab Gulf will remain one of Delhi's enduring challenges

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**Context** India's foreign policy has never consistently followed strict neutrality in international conflicts; its foreign policy has often involved pragmatic & sometimes contradictory choices shaped by strategic interests rather than purely moral positions, especially in the middle east.

## Facts

- 1950 : India tried to block UN condemnation of China's intervention in the Korean war.
- 1956-68 : India's response to soviet moves in Hungary (1956) & Czechoslovakia (1968) stayed muted; Afghanistan (1979) too - late UN abstention under Indira Gandhi (1980).
- 1990 : India avoided condemning Iraq's annexation of Kuwait.

- 1978-80: Vietnam invaded Cambodia (1978); India withheld recognition under Janata, then reversed in 1980 under Congress.
  - 2014: Russia annexed Crimea; India maintained a cautious line.
- Middle East Frame (long-running): US vs region + Israel vs Arabs.
- Today's Gulf stakes: ~\$200 bn trade; ~9 million Indians in Arab Gulf states.

## Theoretical lens + Verbatim Quotes

“Delhi was at pains to argue that its doctrine of non-alignment was not neutrality.”

“India's reluctance to criticise Moscow was rooted in value Delhi attached to Russian connection in managing its security challenges.”

“India did not avoid taking positions; rather, it claimed the right to form them on the merits of each issue - based on independent judgement rather than bloc loyalty.”

## Analytical Crux

- ➔ India was never truly “neutral”: non-alignment meant taking positions by independent judgement, and Delhi has often tilted or even flip-flopped when interests demanded.
- ➔ India's “moral clarity” is easiest against the US/West, but it blurs when Moscow is involved – because the Russian connection is seen as strategically useful.
- ➔ In West Asia, India long read the region through old binaries (US vs region, Israel vs Arabs) and missed the now-central internal rivalries (like Gulf Arabs vs Iran).
- ➔ With roughly \$200 billion trade and nearly nine million Indians in the Gulf, Delhi's current line is driven by stakes, not slogans. The situation reinforces the importance of strategic autonomy in India's West Asia Policy.

### Inside China, authority, conflict and strategic challenges

The progression from Mao Tse Tung/Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping in China reveals the nature of the power shifts that have occurred since the country became a communist nation in 1949. All three iconic leaders, in their own way, demonstrated what was essential to maintain and sustain power in a country that had managed to stage-off takeovers by foreign powers over the years.



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Since 1949, when Mao Tse Tung led the Communist Party of China (CPC) to victory and took control, the three eponymous leaders wielded unquestioned authority over the party and the country. Between 1949 and 2026, there have, no doubt, been many other leaders who steered the country's fortunes, but it is Mao, Deng and Mr. Xi who left an indelible stamp on China's fortunes and progress.

**The 'inner devils'**  
Across China, signs of Mr. Xi's authority are markedly evident. However, even as China has emerged as the second most powerful country, it faces its own 'inner devils'. Periodic purges at the highest levels of state institutions have led to conflicting interpretations as to the real state of affairs. While China outwardly appears to be a monolith, several purges have been intended to eliminate opposition to the leader of the time. This was also the case during the periods of Mao and Deng.

In the latest purge, Mr. Xi removed the highly placed general of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Zhang Youxia, and another senior officer, Gen. Liu Zhenli, from the highest policymaking body of the CPC. The purge also claimed nine military law makers from China's Parliament including Ground Force Commander Li Qiaoming and Information Support Force Political Commissar Li Wei. It is worth examining whether this is merely another purge by Mr. Xi or an indication of the growing challenges to his leadership. A hint to this effect is the language used to describe Gen. Zhang in the People's Liberation Army Daily, viz. 'a toxin that had to be incised'. This could lead to an inference of inner party struggles at the top of the Chinese Communist pyramid. While by no means proven, it is still worth examining.

Given China's global position, the prevailing situation within the country demands closer and deeper understanding of events

Most prophets seem to flounder when it comes to making political predictions. While Mr. Xi may appear stronger on the surface following the recent purges, it is worth considering the nature of the 'inner devils' said to be hindering China's progress. Analysing China's future clearly demands better comprehension of where China stands today.

Over the years, the mask that China is a monolith has been wearing thin. Insightful analysis would seem to suggest that belief in the goals set by the leadership has been declining, producing a degree of 'trust deficit'. Together with a less than optimistic assessment of the state of the Chinese economy, and the problems faced by some of its political institutions, it may be presumed that inner tensions are increasing, and are beginning to impact the highest levels of the party. Dealing with such a situation would undoubtedly require drastic measures to retain control and 'snuff out' all opposition to the leadership, even at the highest party levels. This, rather than accusations of corruption against senior party functionaries, would seem a more plausible explanation for the periodic purges taking place.

**Dents to global credibility**  
Exacerbating international tensions and China's apparent ineffectiveness in addressing challenges beyond its 'near abroad' – namely East and Southeast Asia – seem to have damaged its image as a global power, potentially intensifying tensions within the CPC leadership. Venezuela was a test case of China's global outreach in this respect at the beginning of 2026. China failed the test and could not counter United States President Donald Trump's assertions that the Western Hemisphere belonged to the U.S. and no one else. This despite China having invested a great deal in Venezuela in recent years. More recently, in West Asia, China again failed to demonstrate its ability to checkmate the U.S. and prevent an attack on Iran, leading to the death of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

China is indeed undergoing a turmoil at the very highest levels of the CPC. What is discernible is that a normally belligerent China has, of late, been acting with far greater circumspection than usual in its dealings with the world at large, and with the U.S. in particular. This is even more surprising considering that China is riding a wave of turbocharged innovation in many areas such as electric vehicles, pharmaceuticals and logistics, and, of late, Artificial Intelligence. In all this, China appears well ahead of the curve.

**A reticence**  
What is even more surprising is that – and with the exception of Taiwan – China, of late, has been disinclined to take a confrontational posture, vis-à-vis the U.S., even deferring to it on some issues. The journey of a Chinese cargo ship, in late 2025, from Asia to Europe, through the Arctic Ocean, that was completed in a fortnight as against the normal three weeks (through the Suez Canal), would normally have been heralded by China as evidence of the emergence of a 'Polar Silk Road'. But China has preferred to play down this achievement, stating that this contributes to 'supply chain stability'.

Strategic experts are confounded by this display of reticence, and feel that it is intended to avoid ruffling the feathers of western powers at a time when China's economy is facing certain problems and Mr. Trump has warned of the threat posed to U.S. interests in Greenland by Chinese ships in the vicinity. Apart from this, China's unwillingness to press its claims to being a 'near Arctic State' requires a valid explanation. Most strategic experts seem to feel that problems at the highest levels of the CPC can be the only plausible explanation.

What also needs valid explanation is the general mood of pessimism that appears to be sweeping across China. No plausible explanation has emerged so far. Cracks in the Communist party monolith could possibly be one explanation. Or it might well be an aggravating fear – about 'the wind in the tower heralding a great storm'. All this might appear rather far-fetched for now, but is worthy of more detailed analysis, given the past history of Chinese politics.

Given China's position in the world, the prevailing situation in China deserves a better and more detailed understanding of what is taking place. Events in China cast a shadow not only over Asia but also over much of the world. What is happening in China needs better explanation and understanding. A more benign and less antagonistic China would be of great value to a world facing many crosscurrents. For India, a return to an earlier era of 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers) would be a gift worth savouring.

## Context

Behind China's image of centralised strength under Xi Jinping, rising elite tensions, repeated purges, strategic caution abroad & declining global credibility may be indicating deeper internal stress within the Chinese Communist Party.

## Facts

## Theoretical lens + Verbatim Quotes

“China's conspicuous inability to counter U.S. both in the western hemisphere and in West Asia is undoubtedly having repercussions & may have possibly impacted China's image beyond repair.”

- China became a communist state in 1949 after Mao Tse Tung / Mao Zedong led the party to victory.
- Mao, Deng Xiaoping & Xi Jinping represent the three most decisive phases of power & leadership in China from 1949 to 2026.

## Analytical Crux

China may look like a strong one-party monolith from the outside, but the article argues that Xi Jinping's repeated purges actually point to insecurity, inner-party conflict and a growing trust deficit within the system. Its problem is not just domestic; China's failure to shape outcomes in places like Venezuela & West Asia has also hurt its claim of being a power equal to or stronger than the West. That is why the recent Chinese restraint vis-a-vis the U.S. is read less as confidence and more as caution born out of internal stress. So, the real point is that China's external behaviour cannot be understood without looking at its internal cracks. For India and the wider world, this means China should be seen not simply as an aggressive rising power, but as a powerful state also dealing with deep strategic and political unease.

## Article - 3

**Context** This article situates Indian Navy's Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025 as a timely doctrinal reset at a tense Indo-Pacific inflection point, explaining how it formalises the **No-war, No-Peace (NWNP)** grey-zone space & prioritises multi-domain operations.

## Facts

- **IMD-25**, unveiled on 2 December 2025, is Naval Strategic publication 1.1 (NSP 1.1) – the capstone, apex doctrine in the Navy's doctrinal hierarchy.
- Comes after a long gap: 16 years since IMD-2009 and 10 years since the 2015 maritime security strategy.
- It doctrinally embeds India's Indian Ocean posture via "Preferred Security Partner" and "First Responder".

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### Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025: An Assessment

March 09, 2026 | Issue Brief



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#### Summary

India's Maritime Doctrine 2025 doctrine formalises the No War, No Peace (NWNP) operational category, emphasises multi-domain operations, prioritises emerging technologies, and underscores jointness and integration across the armed forces.



## Theoretical lens + Verbatim Quotes

➔ **NWNP theory:** This concept refers to a security exigency arising from the emergence of a degraded security situation in relations with another state or non-state actor.

➔ A NWNP situation is typically characterised by elevated levels of distrust, cross-border tensions and internal violence, with a looming threat of escalation, creating a complex security environment that represents neither war nor peace.

## Analytical Crux

IMD-25 accepts that today's sea conflict is mostly grey-zone - a No War, No Peace continuum, not a neat peace/war switch. It shifts the Navy toward Multi-Domain Operations, AI & ML enabled awareness & faster decision support. But it leaves the big "why and how" --- weak linkage with SAGAR / MAHASAGAR & unclear meaning of "Preferred Security Partner" and "First Responder".

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