

# While Europe frets, India expects

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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I never used to look at airline route maps too closely. But now, when I journey from one peaceful country to another, I take a keener interest in where exactly we are flying over.

On a flight from London to New Delhi last week, I noticed with incredulity that the route map suggested that we were passing between Donetsk in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. The flight then took us over Russia (this was Air India), then just north of Iran, then over Afghanistan — and finally on to India.

Journalists like to talk about “trouble spots”. But the journey from western Europe to India felt like a trip between two “safe spots” separated by a sea of troubles.

How long can the world’s safe spots keep the sea of troubles at bay? And what is the best strategy for preserving the peace and prosperity of countries that are living on the edge of regions at war?

I’ve encountered different answers to those questions on three trips I’ve made over the past month — to Germany, to Bulgaria and now to India.

In Germany, there was a stark division of opinion. Boris Pistorius, the country’s defence minister, has warned that

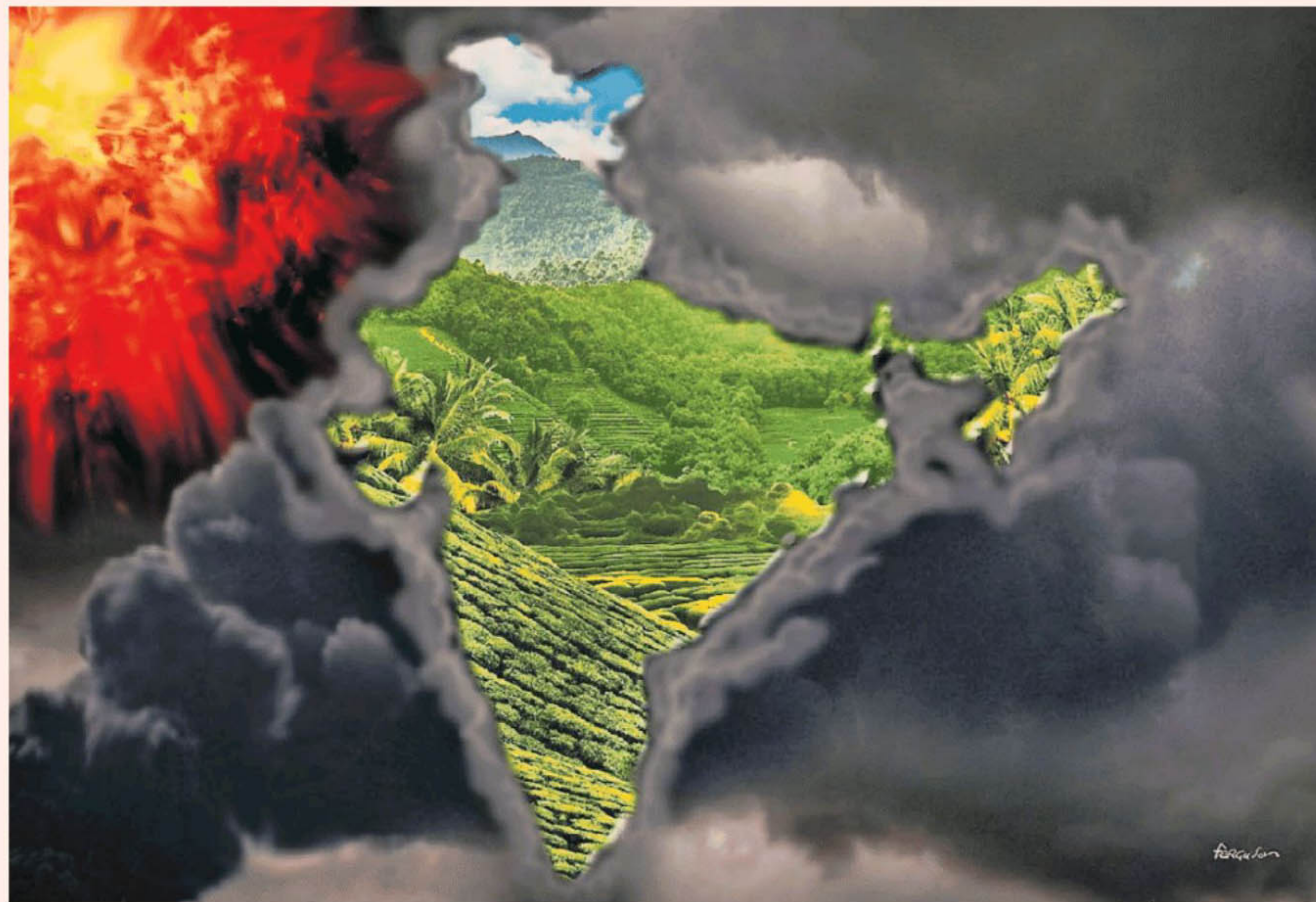
Russia could attack a Nato country within five to eight years. Norbert Röttgen, a prominent member of the Christian Democratic opposition, argues that the best way to prevent that happening is to defeat Russia in Ukraine. He wants to see much more military aid for Kyiv and a dramatic increase in German defence spending.

But the parties of the German far right and far left — which now account for about 30 per cent of the electorate — argue that it is not Russia but the US and Nato that threaten the peace of Europe. They want to give up on Ukraine and to reach out to the Russians.

That school of thought is also increasingly prominent in Bulgaria. One pro-Nato Bulgarian politician laments: “We have lost the word ‘peace’ to the pro-Russian forces.” Bulgarian liberals fear that it is not just rhetorical battles that they may lose in their struggle with pro-Putin populists. With the country heading for its seventh election in three years, the prestige of Bulgarian democracy is declining. Liberals fear their country could be vulnerable to the appeal of a pro-Russian strongman, like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán. The gains for Bulgarian democracy and sovereignty made after 1989 feel newly fragile.

The population of Bulgaria is roughly 20 per cent of that of the Indian capital alone. India’s sheer size and its distance from the frontline mean that its elites wave away suggestions that a victorious Putin would threaten their own security.

American, Japanese and European policymakers have made frequent



efforts to persuade their Indian counterparts that a Russian victory in Ukraine would embolden China — whose forces killed Indian troops in a border clash in 2020. But the conventional wisdom in New Delhi is still that India needs a strong Russia to balance China.

In much of the global south, western arguments about Russian aggression and war crimes are rejected as hypocritical, given America’s unstinting support for Israel. But while Modi’s India sees itself as a leader of the global south, the country views the Middle East very differently. Shekhar Gupta, a prominent Indian journalist, observes that there is an “overwhelming pro-Israel mood among the majority in India”. One prominent member of the governing BJP told me: “The average party foot-

**Rising geopolitical tensions are seen by New Delhi as a business and strategic opportunity**

soldier is all for Israel bombing the hell out of Muslim terrorists.” India has abstained on several UN resolutions condemning Israel and continues to be an enthusiastic buyer of Israeli weaponry and technology.

To the extent that Indians feel threatened by the spreading war in the Middle East, their main concerns are a rise in oil prices, an upsurge in Islamist militancy at home and risks to Indians working in the Gulf. The safety of Indian troops serving with the UN in Lebanon may soon be added to that list.

Even the threat posed by China has an upside for India. The country stands to benefit, as western multinationals try to diversify away from China and lessen dependence on Chinese technology. That effort received official backing with the launch of a US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology — deepening co-operation between the two countries on a range of areas including space, semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

Rising geopolitical tensions are seen as a business and strategic opportunity

for India. As a result, the sense of foreboding about the direction of the world that is so evident in Europe and in liberal America is strikingly absent in official Indian circles.

Are Indians wrong to feel largely protected from the conflicts and tensions in the wider world?

One disquieting possibility that should concern them is the risk that various regional conflicts could become increasingly entangled. They already touch each other at various points. Russia and China have conducted joint air patrols near Alaska and the Sea of Japan. Iran has supplied weapons to Russia. If Israel attacks Iran, Russia might return the favour or seek to profit in other ways. With the western alliance distracted by conflicts elsewhere, China might see a chance to up the pressure in Asia.

If the conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and Asia begin to merge, the world’s sea of troubles will soon be lapping on India’s shores.

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