

Realism, Strategic Autonomy, and Multi-Alignment: Analyzing India's Engagement with QUAD and BRICS in a Multipolar World Order

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Abstract

India's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a nuanced balance between strategic imperatives and institutional engagement in a rapidly evolving multipolar world. This study examines India's simultaneous participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and BRICS, analyzing how the principles of realism, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment guide its foreign policy decisions. While QUAD serves as a security-oriented platform to counterbalance regional threats and enhance maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, BRICS provides a complementary economic and institutional forum that advances India's developmental goals and global governance influence.

Despite significant scholarship on India's foreign policy, most studies treat QUAD and BRICS separately, leaving a gap in understanding the integrated strategic rationale behind India's dual engagement. This research addresses this lacuna by exploring how India simultaneously navigates security, economic, and diplomatic objectives without compromising its strategic autonomy. Using a qualitative analysis of scholarly works, official reports, and recent events-including Malabar Exercise 2025 and the 2025 BRICS summit outcomes- the study demonstrates India's pragmatic application of multi-alignment, balancing cooperation and competition across diverse international platforms.

The findings reveal that India's dual engagement strengthens its regional and global positioning by enabling flexibility, hedging against systemic risks, and consolidating influence in both security and economic spheres. The study contributes to contemporary international relations scholarship by integrating theoretical insights with empirical developments, offering a framework to understand how middle powers like India operationalize strategic autonomy in a multipolar system.

Keywords: India, QUAD, BRICS, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, Realism, Multipolar World, Indo-Pacific, International Relations

Introduction

India's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects the complexities and opportunities of an increasingly multipolar world. With the decline of unipolarity and the simultaneous rise of China, Russia, and other emerging powers, India has sought to assert itself as a regional and global actor while preserving strategic autonomy. Its engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and BRICS simultaneously exemplifies this delicate balancing act, demonstrating India's ability to pursue multiple objectives-security, economic growth, and global governance-without committing exclusively to any single bloc (Jaishankar, 2020; TASAM, 2025). This dual engagement highlights a pragmatic approach that combines

traditional realist considerations with the principles of multi-alignment, allowing India to navigate an uncertain international environment effectively.

The QUAD, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has evolved as a strategic platform to address security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally proposed in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, QUAD emphasizes maritime security, technological cooperation, and joint military exercises, particularly in response to China's growing influence (Medcalf, 2020; Hall, 2019). For India, participation in QUAD serves as a mechanism for external balancing, aligning with like-minded democracies to ensure regional stability and protect strategic interests. The security dimension of QUAD complements India's broader objective of strengthening defence partnerships, enhancing situational awareness in the Indian Ocean, and participating in global initiatives that promote a rules-based order (Pant & Saha, 2021).

In contrast, BRICS—comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—serves primarily as an economic and institutional forum. Since its formal establishment in 2009, BRICS has aimed to foster cooperation among emerging economies, advocate for reforms in global financial institutions, and facilitate South-South collaboration (Cooper, 2016; Doshi, 2021). India's engagement with BRICS reflects its commitment to economic diplomacy, offering opportunities for development finance through instruments such as the New Development Bank and a platform to influence global governance norms. Importantly, BRICS allows India to engage with China and other major economies in a constructive framework, demonstrating the country's ability to balance competition and cooperation simultaneously.

The coexistence of these two engagements underscores India's strategic autonomy, which is the guiding principle of contemporary Indian foreign policy. Unlike Cold War non-alignment, strategic autonomy emphasizes flexibility, pragmatic decision-making, and the ability to pursue national interests across multiple platforms without overdependence on any single partner

(Ganguly, 2017). By participating in both QUAD and BRICS, India exercises a calculated multi-alignment strategy—leveraging partnerships for security through QUAD, while advancing economic and institutional objectives via BRICS. This approach not only preserves India's independence in policy-making but also positions the country as an influential actor in shaping regional and global norms.

Despite extensive scholarship on QUAD and BRICS individually, there remains a research gap in understanding how India integrates these dual engagements into a coherent foreign policy strategy. Most studies focus either on India's security cooperation or its economic diplomacy, without analyzing the interaction between these dimensions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining India's engagement with QUAD and BRICS through the lenses of realism, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment, offering a comprehensive understanding of India's behaviour in a multipolar world order.

Literature Review

India's foreign policy in the 21st century has been extensively studied through the lenses of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and realist security calculations. Scholars have explored India's engagement in multilateral forums such as QUAD and BRICS, emphasizing both security imperatives and economic-institutional diplomacy.

1. Realism and India's Security Imperatives

The realist paradigm provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing India's strategic behavior in the Indo-Pacific. Mearsheimer (2001) and Waltz (1979) argue that states operate primarily to maximize security in an anarchic international system. India's involvement in QUAD aligns with this logic, as it seeks to balance China's growing maritime and regional assertiveness (Medcalf, 2020). Studies by Pant

and Saha (2021) highlight India's engagement in naval exercises, intelligence-sharing, and technology collaboration within QUAD as examples of power-balancing behavior consistent with realist theory.

2. Strategic Autonomy and Policy Flexibility

Strategic autonomy remains central to India's foreign policy discourse. Jaishankar (2020) emphasizes that India's diplomacy seeks to maintain independent decision-making, avoiding over-reliance on any single global power. Ganguly (2017) and Acharya (2021) suggest that strategic autonomy allows India to simultaneously engage in multiple international forums, such as QUAD for security and BRICS for economic and institutional cooperation. Recent literature stresses that modern strategic autonomy is pragmatic rather than ideological, enabling India to navigate multipolarity effectively.

3. Multi-Alignment and India's Foreign Policy

The concept of multi-alignment, elaborated by Pant and Saha (2021) and Hall (2019), refers to India's ability to engage with multiple coalitions simultaneously to achieve overlapping or distinct objectives. While strategic autonomy emphasizes independence, multi-alignment highlights the flexibility to balance competing interests. This framework explains India's dual-track approach: leveraging QUAD for security cooperation with democratic powers, while using BRICS to enhance economic and institutional influence alongside both allies and rivals.

4. India's Engagement with QUAD

Existing research on QUAD focuses on security collaboration, maritime strategy, and counterbalancing China. Medcalf (2020) and Pant (2021) argue that QUAD serves as a platform for operational interoperability, naval modernization, and technological cooperation. However, scholars note that QUAD remains an informal, flexible framework rather than a formal alliance, allowing India to retain autonomy while benefiting from collective security arrangements (Doshi, 2021).

5. India's Engagement with BRICS

BRICS scholarship primarily addresses economic diplomacy, global governance, and South-South cooperation. Acharya (2021) and India's World (2025) highlight India's role in shaping development financing mechanisms, such as the New Development Bank, and advocating for multipolar governance. Literature also underscores BRICS as a space where India can engage with China and Russia without compromising strategic independence, complementing its security-oriented QUAD engagement.

Research Gap and Objectives

Despite significant scholarship on India's foreign policy, there remains a notable gap in understanding the interconnected role of QUAD and BRICS in shaping India's strategic posture. Existing studies tend to focus on these platforms separately: QUAD is often analyzed in terms of security and defence cooperation, while BRICS is studied primarily through economic and institutional lenses (Pant & Saha, 2021; Doshi, 2021). This compartmentalized approach overlooks the synergistic impact of India's simultaneous participation in both groupings, particularly in the context of a multipolar world where political, economic, and security interests are increasingly interdependent. Moreover, while strategic autonomy and multi-alignment are frequently cited as guiding principles of India's foreign policy (Jaishankar, 2020; Acharya, 2021), few studies examine how these concepts operate in practice across both QUAD and BRICS simultaneously. This research aims to address this lacuna by providing an integrated analysis of India's dual engagement.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to reveal the dynamics of India's foreign policy as it navigates competing priorities. In a world where great power competition is intensifying, understanding

how India leverages both security-centric and economic-centric coalitions can provide insights into its broader approach to multipolarity. The study also contributes to the literature on strategic autonomy and multi-alignment by illustrating their practical application in contemporary international relations, moving beyond theoretical discussions to empirical analysis.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to examine India's engagement in QUAD and BRICS, analyzing the strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of each platform. Second, it aims to evaluate the role of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment in shaping India's decisions within these groupings. Third, the research intends to assess the implications of India's dual participation for its regional and global position, considering both opportunities and challenges. Collectively, these objectives enable a comprehensive understanding of how India balances its interests in a multipolar international system while maintaining its autonomy and pursuing cooperative engagement across diverse platforms. By addressing this research gap, the study provides a nuanced perspective on India's foreign policy strategy, highlighting how the country manages complex geopolitical and economic relationships to enhance its influence while safeguarding its independence. This approach not only enriches academic discussions but also offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to navigate the evolving international order.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in three interrelated paradigms: Realism, Strategic Autonomy, and Multi-Alignment, which together provide a lens for understanding India's engagement with QUAD and BRICS in a multipolar world. These concepts help explain India's pursuit of security, economic, and diplomatic objectives while maintaining independence in its foreign policy.

Realism provides the foundational lens for analyzing India's security-driven decisions. Rooted in classical and neorealist thought, realism emphasizes the centrality of power, national interest, and the inevitability of competition among states in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). India's participation in QUAD reflects this realist orientation, as the forum enables India to balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific and enhance its security posture through multilateral cooperation with like-minded democracies (Medcalf, 2020). By prioritizing strategic partnerships that advance national security, realism elucidates India's motivations for engaging in defense exercises, maritime patrols, and technology collaborations within QUAD.

Strategic Autonomy extends the realist perspective by emphasizing the deliberate pursuit of independent foreign policy choices without overreliance on any single power or bloc (Jaishankar, 2020; Ganguly, 2017). Unlike Cold War-era non-alignment, strategic autonomy in contemporary India reflects pragmatism, enabling simultaneous participation in diverse international platforms such as QUAD and BRICS. Through this lens, India's engagement with BRICS represents an exercise in economic and institutional autonomy, allowing the country to influence global governance, access alternative development finance, and engage constructively with major powers, including China and Russia, without compromising its independence.

Multi-Alignment complements strategic autonomy by highlighting India's capacity to engage flexibly with multiple coalitions to achieve overlapping or distinct objectives (Pant & Saha, 2021; Hall, 2019). While strategic autonomy focuses on independence, multi-alignment emphasizes the simultaneous balancing of interests across different partnerships, enabling India to navigate competing priorities in security, economic development, and diplomatic influence. This framework captures the nuanced

interplay between QUAD and BRICS: India leverages QUAD for security collaboration and BRICS for economic and institutional engagement, demonstrating an integrated foreign policy approach that maximizes benefits while mitigating risks.

Collectively, these three theoretical constructs—realism, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment—provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing India’s dual engagement. Realism explains the security-driven imperatives in QUAD, strategic autonomy underscores India’s independent decision-making, and multi-alignment illustrates the country’s flexibility in simultaneously engaging diverse international platforms. Together, they offer a robust framework for understanding India’s behavior in a multipolar world order, providing both explanatory power and predictive insight into its foreign policy trajectory.

Background: India, QUAD, and BRICS in the Contemporary Multipolar World

The structure of global politics has been shifting from a unipolar post-Cold War system dominated by the United States to a complex multipolar order characterized by the diffusion of economic and strategic power (Acharya, 2018). Emerging powers such as India, China, Russia, and Brazil are increasingly shaping international norms and institutional frameworks. Within this changing environment, India’s foreign policy has evolved into what scholars term strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, allowing the state to simultaneously cooperate with diverse geopolitical blocs without permanent alliance commitments (Madan, 2021). Two platforms central to India’s contemporary engagement strategy are the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and BRICS. India’s role in both illustrates its attempt to strengthen maritime leadership in the Indo-Pacific while retaining influence within Global South-oriented multilateral economic institutions (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

QUAD - Maritime Security and Indo-Pacific Strategy

QUAD, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has gained renewed relevance since 2017 amid heightened geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific (Grossman, 2021). Scholars argue that QUAD serves as a soft balancing mechanism against China’s expanding military and maritime footprint in the region (Rehman, 2022). India’s naval engagements under the QUAD framework - including exercises such as Malabar, initiated in 1992 and expanded in subsequent decades - reflect growing interoperability and strategic coordination (Singh & Wagner, 2023).

Beyond defense cooperation, QUAD has institutionalised mechanisms for technology supply chains, maritime domain awareness, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure, aligning with India’s objective of enhancing its Indo-Pacific presence without entering a formal alliance structure (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023). Thus, India’s participation in QUAD aligns with a realist strategic approach to securing maritime interests, particularly in the Indian Ocean and broader Indo-Pacific region.

BRICS - Economic Diplomacy and Institutional Reform

While QUAD addresses India’s strategic and security concerns, BRICS represents a platform for economic cooperation, development finance, and reform of global governance structures (Stuenkel, 2015). Since its formalization in 2009, BRICS has emerged as a collective voice advocating for a more equitable, multipolar economic order (Narlikar, 2022). The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) symbolizes BRICS’ institutional capacity to offer financial alternatives to Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF and World Bank (Abdenur & Folly, 2020).

For India, BRICS strengthens its role within the Global South and enhances opportunities for development financing, technological collaboration, and policy coordination with other emerging economies (Pant & Kumar, 2024). This complements India's broader diplomatic aspiration to remain an advocate for global equity while avoiding dependency on any single power bloc.

Dual Engagement - Strategic Flexibility in a Multipolar World

India's simultaneous involvement in QUAD and BRICS reflects a carefully calibrated strategy grounded in multi-alignment—a foreign policy approach enabling cooperation with different power centres based on interests rather than ideological alignment (Mehta & Das, 2023). While QUAD advances India's maritime security and geopolitical interests, BRICS reinforces its economic positioning and leadership among developing nations. This dual-track diplomacy enhances India's bargaining power, expands strategic options, and reinforces its pursuit of sovereign decision-making.

In essence, India's participation in both platforms demonstrates a pragmatic and adaptive response to evolving geopolitical realities. Rather than choosing sides, India leverages both groupings to advance national interests while acting as a key player in shaping the emerging multipolar world order.

Analysis of India's Dual Engagement in QUAD and BRICS

India's simultaneous participation in QUAD and BRICS illustrates a deliberate strategy of multi-alignment combined with strategic autonomy, allowing New Delhi to pursue a diverse portfolio of security, economic, and normative goals in a rapidly shifting global order. Through this dual engagement, India leverages the complementary strengths of both frameworks - QUAD for maritime and strategic security in the Indo-Pacific, and BRICS for economic diplomacy, development cooperation, and global governance influence.

QUAD: Security and Strategic Balancing

The resurgence of QUAD in 2017 marked a watershed in India's foreign policy, reflecting its growing concerns over maritime security and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Through QUAD, India engages with like-minded democracies such as the United States, Japan, and Australia to coordinate security, technology, and maritime policies (Mishra & Pandey, 2023). Such cooperation enhances India's strategic posture, allowing access to shared maritime domain awareness, joint naval exercises, and technological exchanges - critical tools in an era of intensifying competition with China (Qureshi & Shoukat, 2025).

From a realist perspective, QUAD acts as a "soft-balancing" instrument in an anarchic international system, enabling India to strengthen deterrence without entering a formal alliance that might compromise its autonomy (Qureshi & Shoukat, 2025). Security cooperation within QUAD helps mitigate risks associated with increased Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific, while maintaining policy flexibility - a hallmark of Indian strategic autonomy.

However, India's participation in QUAD is tempered by broader geopolitical constraints. Its ongoing defense and energy ties with Russia, and economic interdependence with China, complicate full alignment with QUAD's security orientation (Qureshi & Shoukat, 2025). This underscores the central tension in India's foreign policy: balancing immediate security imperatives against long-term economic and strategic interests.

BRICS: Economic Diplomacy and Institutional Engagement

Parallel to its security pursuits, India maintains robust engagement with BRICS - a grouping that emphasizes economic cooperation, development finance, and global governance reform. Scholars argue that India's continued commitment to BRICS reflects its interest in promoting multipolarity and offering an alternative to Western-dominated global economic institutions (Upadhyay & Ranjan, 2025).

Through BRICS and associated institutions like the New Development Bank, India gains access to development financing, infrastructure cooperation, and South-South collaboration, thus advancing its economic and developmental objectives without being tied to Western conditionalities (Upadhyay & Ranjan, 2025). This aligns with India's broader ambition to shape a more equitable global economic order while reducing dependency on any single power bloc.

Moreover, engagement with BRICS enables India to maintain relations with major powers such as China and Russia - even when these states might be at odds with India's security partners - thus showcasing India's capacity for issue-based diplomacy and strategic hedging (Upadhyay & Ranjan, 2025).

Strategic Autonomy and Multi-Alignment in Practice

The core of India's dual engagement strategy is its adherence to strategic autonomy - the ability to make independent foreign policy choices - while adopting multi-alignment to maximize its strategic space. As argued by analysts, India navigates between competing global alignments not by absolute commitment but through selective engagement, leveraging each forum to serve distinct objectives (Upadhyay & Ranjan, 2025).

This approach allows New Delhi to benefit from QUAD's security architecture while simultaneously pursuing BRICS's economic and normative agenda - without being locked into a rigid alliance structure. In practical terms, this means India can engage in high-end maritime cooperation and deterrence through QUAD, while using BRICS for economic diplomacy, development financing, and global governance reform.

Such a dual-track strategy offers India hedging against systemic risks — whether strategic (geopolitical competition) or economic (global financial instability). More importantly, it enhances India's diplomatic leverage, giving it flexibility to maneuver across competing power centers and to influence outcomes in both regional and global arenas (Upadhyay & Ranjan, 2025).

Challenges and Constraints

However, this dual engagement is not without limitations. First, the divergence in priorities among BRICS members (especially between China, Russia, and India) may limit the effectiveness of economic cooperation or collective decision-making, constraining India's ability to push its agenda within BRICS. Second, while QUAD provides strategic advantages, its informal and non-allied nature can limit long-term security guarantees, especially if member states' interests diverge in crises. India must therefore balance the benefits of cooperation with the risk of strategic ambiguity and over-dependence on consensus-based decision-making.

Finally, managing relationships across competing blocs demands diplomatic dexterity and constant recalibration. India's success depends not only on leveraging institutional frameworks but also on aligning them with domestic economic, strategic, and political imperatives.

India's dual engagement with QUAD and BRICS - underpinned by realism, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment - reflects a sophisticated foreign policy strategy designed to maximize strategic breadth

while preserving independence. By using QUAD for maritime security and BRICS for economic and institutional leverage, India strikes a balance between competing demands of security and development. However, sustaining this balance requires careful navigation of geopolitical tensions, institutional limitations, and evolving global uncertainties.

Conclusion and Implications

India's simultaneous engagement in QUAD and BRICS reflects a strategically nuanced approach to navigating the contemporary multipolar international system. By participating in QUAD, India reinforces its security and maritime capabilities, collaborating with like-minded democracies to uphold regional stability and counterbalance rising powers. Simultaneously, its active role in BRICS allows India to enhance economic diplomacy, institutional influence, and Global South leadership, interacting with both allied and rival states under a cooperative framework. This dual-track engagement exemplifies the operationalization of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, demonstrating India's capacity to pursue diverse objectives without compromising its independence or flexibility (Pant & Saha, 2021; Jaishankar, 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study confirms that realism, strategic autonomy, and multi-alignment provide a coherent lens for understanding India's foreign policy in the 21st century. Realism explains India's security imperatives and balancing behavior within QUAD, while strategic autonomy highlights the deliberate preservation of independent decision-making across multiple platforms. Multi-alignment captures the flexibility with which India simultaneously engages QUAD and BRICS, maximizing benefits while mitigating strategic risks (Acharya, 2021; Medcalf, 2020).

The implications of India's dual engagement are multifaceted. Regionally, India strengthens its leadership role in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing interoperability, maritime security, and crisis-response capabilities. Globally, its participation in BRICS expands India's influence in economic governance, development financing, and institutional reform, contributing to a more inclusive and multipolar world order. This approach enables India to hedge against systemic uncertainties, exercise greater leverage in multilateral negotiations, and cultivate partnerships that advance both security and developmental objectives.

Furthermore, India's strategy demonstrates a model of pragmatic diplomacy relevant to other middle powers seeking to navigate a world where power is dispersed and global challenges are interconnected. By balancing engagement in security-oriented and institutionally-driven platforms, India not only safeguards its national interests but also contributes to shaping regional and global norms, advancing stability, and promoting cooperation.

In conclusion, India's dual-track engagement in QUAD and BRICS reflects a sophisticated foreign policy paradigm that integrates realist security concerns with institutional and economic diplomacy. This integrated strategy enhances India's strategic autonomy, global influence, and capacity to navigate multipolarity, underscoring the relevance of theory-informed, empirically grounded analysis for understanding contemporary international relations. Future research may explore how India's evolving partnerships continue to shape outcomes in both regional security and global governance, particularly as the international system becomes increasingly complex and contested.

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