

# Emerging Trends in India's Foreign Policy in the Multipolar World Order

Mr. Gadugu Dheeraj Srinivas<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Dr. Sreemathi D<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Political science, Dr Ambedkar Global Law Institute, Tirupati A.P

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Law, Dr Ambedkar Global Law Institute, Tirupati A.P

## Abstract

India is one of the ancient civilizations that has its influence over the world. The roots of Indian civilization in the form of ideas theories philosophies are present in the world and can be traced all over. Example : Kautilya's Arthashastra on statecraft and foreign policy. The journey of Indian foreign policy began times immemorial and turned robust in the 20th century. The dynamism in the foreign policy has made India to stand among the Global powers and exert its influence. India faced tough times when the ideal leaders in the initial stages formulated policies that were far away from the hard realities. The 21st century leaders through the realist approach to the foreign policy have created a level playing field for India in the multipolar world balancing the super powers. India has contributed immensely to the world community mainly in the International organizations striving to promote the world peace. The brotherhood nature of India can be witnessed in the policies like Non Aligned Movement, Look East, Act East, vaccine maitri, developmental programs in Afghanistan etc. With the changing world order India has shifted its gears through the strong foreign policy ensuring the national interests and also the World peace. The role played by India in UNO and all the regional groupings is aiming only at the goal of making world the better place to live with peace and co operation.

## 1. Introduction: India and the Changing Global Power Structure

The international system is gradually shifting away from the <sup>1</sup>post-Cold War period of single-power dominance toward a more competitive and fragmented order, where power is shared among several state and non-state actors operating across different regions and areas. This <sup>2</sup>shift does not only reflect the weakening of one dominant power but also highlights growing powers across areas such as security, trade, finance, technology, and the credibility of global institutions. As a consequence, faith in a single, rules-based global order has weakened, and there is a growing expectation of a multipolar future in which power and influence are shared and continually negotiated.

According to the *Global Risks Report 2026*, published by the <sup>3</sup>World Economic Forum, "68% of experts anticipate a fragmented global order dominated by competing regional powers." This is because of the way in which nations pick partners and attempt to gain more strategic independence.

---

<sup>1</sup> N Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (Penguin 2005).

<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Risks Report 2025: Digest' (15 January 2025)  
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/digest/> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Risks Report 2025: Digest' (15 January 2025)  
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/digest/> accessed 18 February 2026.

A multipolar world is evident in the amount of military action that is increasing in international politics. This is evident in the military expenditure of the world. According to SIPRI, the <sup>4</sup>world's military expenditure in 2024 was USD 2,718 billion, an increase of 9.4% in real terms from 2023, which is the largest annual increase since the end of the Cold War. <sup>5</sup>The world's military expenditure also increased to 2.5% of world GDP. <sup>6</sup>Both of these trends demonstrate and contribute to multipolar rivalry. They demonstrate how great power rivalry leads to insecurity and how issues such as deterrence, escalation, and alliances become more complex, particularly for the middle powers or swing states such as India. Alongside security competition, <sup>7</sup>geo-economic fragmentation has emerged as a defining structural trend. This refers to the policy-driven disruption of economic integration trade, supply chains, finance, data and technology flows often justified through national security, resilience, or strategic rivalry. The IMF has warned that the economic costs of fragmentation can be large and unevenly distributed. Its synthesis of quantitative studies notes that <sup>8</sup>the cost to global output from trade fragmentation may range from 0.2% (limited fragmentation, low adjustment costs) to up to 7% of global GDP (severe fragmentation, high adjustment costs), and that <sup>9</sup>with technological decoupling layered on, losses could reach 8–12% of GDP in some countries. These estimates are important for India because they suggest that the global environment facing emerging powers will become less predictable, less open, and more politicized. This increases the importance of building a range of partnerships and strengthening domestic capabilities. However, fragmentation does not mean deglobalization. International trade remains strong and prepared to adjust. According to <sup>10</sup>UNCTAD, world trade in 2024 will be approximately US\$33 trillion, led primarily by the growth of services trade. It's not all about decoupling. We are still interlinked economically, but now our interlinks are conditioned by instruments such as export controls, sanctions, investment screenings, industrial policies, and competition for standards and key technologies. The challenge for India is how to remain interlinked economically to sustain growth while mitigating risks associated with coercion, restrictive policies, and vulnerabilities in supply chains.

As India places more emphasis on its economic power and material capabilities in its foreign policy, such large changes are even more important. According to the World Bank, the GDP of India at current prices is approximately US\$3.91 trillion in 2024, indicating that it is one of the biggest economies in the world. The International Monetary Fund states that India continued to perform well despite global uncertainty, with <sup>11</sup>real GDP growth of 6.5% in the 2024-25 financial year and <sup>12</sup>7.8% growth in the first quarter of the 2025-26 financial year. Such figures are not mere statistics but increase India's bargaining position in trade

---

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The Global Risks Report 2025: Digest' (15 January 2025)

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/digest/> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>5</sup> SIPRI (N4).

<sup>6</sup> SIPRI (N4).

<sup>7</sup> International Monetary Fund, 'Goeconomic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism' (Staff Discussion Note SDN/2023/001, January 2023) <https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/sdn/2023/english/sdnea2023001.pdf> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>8</sup> IMF (n 7) 5 (Executive Summary: cited range 0.2%–7% global GDP).

<sup>9</sup> IMF (n 7) 5 (Executive Summary: technological decoupling losses 8–12% in some countries).

<sup>10</sup> UNCTAD, 'Global Trade Update (December 2024)' (4 December 2024) <https://unctad.org/publication/global-trade-update-december-2024> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, 'India | Data' (2024) <https://data.worldbank.org/country/india> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>12</sup> International Monetary Fund, 'India: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report' (25 November 2025) <https://www.imf.org/en/publications/cr/issues/2025/11/25/india-2025-article-iv-consultation-press-release-staff-report-and-statement-by-the-572056> accessed 18 February 2026.

negotiations, release funds for the modernization of the defense sector, and make it an attractive partner for the diversification of global supply chains.

India is <sup>13</sup>influenced by shifts in the global order not just in economic and security terms, but also through evolving and contested governance and legal frameworks. With the expansion of multipolarity, political contestation has grown around rules and institutions, including trade law, maritime regimes, dispute resolution processes, and interpretations of “security exceptions.” India’s external approach reflects a dual role. It supports stable rules for trade and navigation within the existing international system, while also advocating institutional reform, particularly in relation to representation and agenda-setting. This dual approach is visible in recent case law linked to India’s strategic interests. In the trade domain, disputes over tariffs and industrial policy increasingly mirror wider competition over technology and industrial capabilities. In the WTO dispute India, <sup>14</sup>“Tariff Treatment on Certain Goods in the Information and Communication Technology Sector (DS582)”, the panel ruled against India’s tariff practices relating to certain ICT products. India subsequently appealed the decision in December 2023, despite ongoing challenges facing the WTO Appellate Body. The importance of this dispute goes beyond questions of tariff compliance. It shows how trade policy related to technology has become an arena where major powers contest international commitments. This creates challenges for India as it seeks to promote domestic industrial policies, particularly in electronics manufacturing and other strategic sectors, while meeting its external obligations. More recently, legal disputes have increasingly centred on India’s competition with China. In <sup>15</sup> December 2025, China requested consultations with India at the World Trade Organization over measures affecting solar cells, solar modules, and certain technology and IT sectors (DS644). This dispute highlights how strategic industries, especially renewable energy and technology are increasingly becoming sites of legal contestation in a multipolar global order.

In the security and diplomatic domain, international adjudication has also shaped India’s external constraints and choices. The <sup>16</sup>ICJ’s judgment in *Jadhav (India v Pakistan)*, while not “foreign policy doctrine,” remains a landmark in India’s legal-diplomatic strategy, reinforcing the centrality of consular access and “review and reconsideration” obligations under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Such cases show that India, even as it pursues strategic autonomy, increasingly operates in a world where legal instruments and international forums are used as tools of diplomacy, signalling, and constraint. Similarly, in maritime and jurisdictional matters, the <sup>17</sup>UNCLOS arbitration in the “*Enrica Lexie*” Incident (*Italy v. India*) demonstrates how questions of sovereignty, the law of the sea, and immunity intersect. These issues are central to India’s maritime diplomacy and its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, India’s rise in a multipolar environment is not merely a question of increasing power. Rather, it involves managing a global context in which security competition has intensified, <sup>18</sup> economic

---

<sup>13</sup> International Monetary Fund, ‘IMF Executive Board Concludes 2025 Article IV Consultation with India’ (26 November 2025) <https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2025/11/24/pr-25392-india-imf-executive-board-concludes-2025-article-iv-consultation> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>14</sup> Shekhar Aiyar and others, ‘Geoeconomic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism’ (n 7).

<sup>15</sup> WTO, *India—Tariff Treatment on Certain Goods in the Information and Communication Technology Sector* (DS582) [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/dispu\\_e/cases\\_e/ds582\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/cases_e/ds582_e.htm) accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>16</sup> WTO, *India—Measures Concerning Trade in Goods in the Solar Cell, Solar Module and Information Technology Sectors* (DS644) [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/dispu\\_e/cases\\_e/ds644\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/cases_e/ds644_e.htm) accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>17</sup> international Court of Justice, *Jadhav (India v Pakistan)* (Judgment, 17 July 2019) <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/168> accessed 18 February 2026.

<sup>18</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration, *The ‘Enrica Lexie’ Incident (Italy v India)* (Award, 21 May 2020; published 10 August 2020) <https://pca-cpa.org/ru/cases/117/> accessed 18 February 2026.

interdependence is increasingly used as a strategic tool, and the <sup>19</sup>rules-based order is both relied upon and challenged often at the same time by the same actors. India's strategic geography makes these pressures particularly acute. Located at the centre of the Indian Ocean and close to key energy routes in the Persian Gulf as well as major Indo-Pacific sea lanes, India must strengthen its maritime capabilities, pursue connectivity diplomacy, and build regional partnerships, while also managing continental challenges along disputed borders. In response, India's foreign policy has increasingly emphasised <sup>20</sup> *strategic autonomy* and multi-alignment, aiming to maintain flexibility by engaging with multiple power centres without aligning fully with any single bloc. This approach is also reflected in leadership discourse. In policy statements, Indian leadership has framed the contemporary environment as one characterised by instability and weaponised interdependence, requiring diversified partnerships and independent decision-making. For instance, <sup>21</sup>External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's remarks at the Raisina Roundtable in Tokyo (March 2024) present a worldview in which partnerships are pragmatic, autonomy is central, and the strategic environment is shaped by rapid shifts.

India's recent experience in agenda-setting forums further reinforces the claim that India is attempting to move from being a "rule taker" to a "rule shaper." The <sup>22</sup>G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (September 2023) explicitly framed the global moment as historically defining, and it linked development, technology, and governance reform to global stability. Even where geopolitical agreement was limited, the significance of the document lies in its demonstration of India's growing role as a convening power and its ability to prioritise issues central to Global South concerns, including development finance, inclusion, digital public infrastructure, food security, and climate transition. Accordingly, this paper argues that India's foreign policy in the evolving multipolar order is shaped by the need to balance three main objectives:

1. Maintaining strategic autonomy amid pressures from rival blocs and forms of coercive economic interdependence.
2. Strengthening its role through Mini lateral partnerships, thematic leadership, and active participation in agenda-setting institutions; and
3. Managing security risks, especially in relation to China, the Indo-Pacific, and technology-dependent vulnerabilities while sustaining long-term growth and diplomatic legitimacy.

This paper therefore analyses India's foreign policy trends as a coherent strategic response to broader structural changes, rather than as a series of isolated partnerships or one-off events. These changes include the rise of competitive multipolarity, the increasing strategic politicisation of economic integration, and growing contestation over legal and institutional rules of global governance.

## 2. Multipolarity, Middle-Power Diplomacy, and India's Strategic Autonomy in a Changing World Order

In mainstream International Relations (IR) theory, "multipolarity" describes an international system in which several states possess consequential power material and ideational such that no single state (or

---

<sup>19</sup> SIPRI (n 4).

<sup>20</sup> IMF (n 7).

<sup>21</sup> WTO DS582 (n 15); WTO DS644 (n 16).

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (India), 'Remarks by EAM Dr S Jaishankar at the Raisina Roundtable in Tokyo (7 March 2024)' [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37684/Remarks\\_by\\_EAM\\_Dr\\_S\\_Jaishankar\\_at\\_the\\_Raisina\\_Roundtable\\_in\\_Tokyo\\_March\\_07\\_2024](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37684/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Raisina_Roundtable_in_Tokyo_March_07_2024) accessed 18 February 2026.

dyad) can consistently determine key global outcomes.<sup>23</sup> This contrasts with bipolarity (two predominant power centres) and unipolarity (one predominant centre). Classical structural realism ties systemic stability to the number of major powers and the dynamics of alliance formation, misperception, and crisis management; in this tradition, Kenneth Waltz's early work on polarity helped anchor debates on how system structure shapes alliance behavior and uncertainty.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary research increasingly argues that today's order is not only "multipolar," but also fragmented and cross-cutting: overlapping institutions, regional orders, and issue-specific coalitions coexist, sometimes in tension with each other. Amitav Acharya has termed this shift a "multiplex world," in which a number of orders coexist at the same time rather than a single system replacing another.<sup>25</sup> This thought is beneficial for India in two ways: (a) it indicates that agency is expanding from the major powers, and (b) it identifies various locations where agency can occur, such as climate, technology, supply chains, and development finance. A critical characteristic of multipolar (and multiplex) contexts is that they tend to reward flexible alignment strategies. Rather than fixed blocs, states often pursue a mixture of issue-based cooperation and selective balancing, producing what some analysts frame as "unbalanced multipolarity" a system where power diffuses to capable middle powers even as top-tier power remains concentrated among a few.<sup>26</sup> This helps explain why many states including India behave as if the international system is "multipolar enough" to allow bargaining space, even when any single issue (e.g., high-end military technology or global finance) may still reflect concentrated power. Within this landscape, the turn to small-group formats is not an anomaly but a rational response to coordination problems. Moises Naim popularized the term "minilateralism" to describe governance approaches that bring together the smallest number of states needed to achieve meaningful impact on a specific problem, as an alternative (or complement) to gridlocked universal multilateralism.<sup>27</sup> This conceptual lens maps cleanly onto the rise of India-facing formats such as the Quad and issue-based coalitions on infrastructure, supply chains, and standards.

### 3. Middle-power diplomacy and the logic of strategic autonomy

"Middle powers" are commonly defined not only by intermediate material capabilities but also by distinctive diplomatic behavior coalition-building, institutional entrepreneurship, niche diplomacy, and a preference for rules and predictable bargaining environments.<sup>28</sup> A major strand of the literature links middle-power identity to being a "good international citizen," while also cautioning that the concept should be treated as context-dependent and continuously reinterpreted as global structures change.<sup>29</sup> This behavioral approach is important for India because it allows us to move beyond the question "Is India a great power yet?" and examine how India acts in various settings. Middle-power diplomacy typically employs three instruments:

1. First, there is the question of institutional positioning. Middle powers want to have a voice in major decision-making forums that expand their reach. This is why there is a tendency in literature to see the

---

<sup>23</sup> MEA (n 22).

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill 1979) 161–193.

<sup>25</sup> Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Polity Press 2014) 57–82; Amitav Acharya, 'After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order' (2017) 120 *Ethics & International Affairs* 271.

<sup>26</sup> Barry R Posen, 'Emerging Multipolarity and the Future of American Grand Strategy' (2009) 29 *International Security* 5.

<sup>27</sup> Moisés Naím, 'Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action' (2009) *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew F Cooper, Richard A Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (UBC Press 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Robert W Cox, 'Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order' (1989) 44 *International Journal* 823.

Group of Twenty as a platform where states can contribute to shaping norms and crisis management responses that go beyond what their military capabilities would otherwise achieve.<sup>30</sup>

2. Second is the formation of coalitions. Middle powers tend to create fluid coalitions to promote particular agendas, diversify their dependence on any particular patron state, and leverage their influence in various settings.<sup>31</sup>
3. Third, niche diplomacy concentrates efforts on a few selected areas (climate, maritime security, development partnerships, digital governance) where small investments can yield big returns in terms of reputation and influence.<sup>32</sup>

In India's case, these behavioral tendencies are tightly connected to "strategic autonomy." Importantly, strategic autonomy is not synonymous with neutrality. Rather, it refers to maintaining decision freedom the ability to choose partners and positions without binding alliance commitments that foreclose options.<sup>33</sup> The report *NonAlignment 2.0* produced by a policy group associated with Centre for Policy Research explicitly frames "strategic autonomy" as a continuous goal of India's international policy and argues that it must be renovated for twenty-first-century conditions.<sup>34</sup> It also makes a crucial structural claim: autonomy is constrained not only by security threats but by developmental and resource dependence especially energy dependence which sets practical limits on strategic choice. This is where middle-power diplomacy and strategic autonomy intersect: The Indian diplomacy seeks to maintain the space to act through the establishment of varied relationships and not alliances, and through the use of multilateral and small-group settings.

#### 4. Evolution from non-alignment to multi-alignment

India's foreign policy evolution is best understood as a sequence of adaptations to shifting external structures and internal capabilities rather than as a simple ideological swing.<sup>35</sup> In the years immediately following independence, India's external engagement was grounded in anti-colonial solidarities and a strong emphasis on maintaining policy independence. During Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership, non-alignment emerged as a "third way" between rival blocs and was closely associated with India's leadership role in the postcolonial world.<sup>36</sup> Formalised in Belgrade in 1961, the Non-Aligned Movement promoted independence from rival blocs, opposition to colonialism and apartheid, peaceful coexistence, and greater emphasis on the UN system. Even in later decades, India's official diplomacy continued to draw on the normative language of the Non-Aligned Movement as a source of legitimacy and continuity.<sup>37</sup>

The post-Cold War period brought two major changes with lasting effects: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapid expansion of economic globalisation. Together, these developments encouraged India to diversify its partnerships and to place greater emphasis on linking foreign policy with economic powers. India's own official accounts identify the early 1990s as a turning point for eastward re-engagement:

---

<sup>30</sup> Andrew F Cooper and Ramesh Thakur, *The Group of Twenty (G20)* (Routledge 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford University Press 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Alan Henrikson, 'Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena' in Jan Melissen (ed), *The New Public Diplomacy* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

<sup>33</sup> C Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Carnegie Endowment 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Sunil Khilnani and others, *NonAlignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century* (Centre for Policy Research 2012).

<sup>35</sup> C Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon* (Penguin 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches* (Publications Division 1961).

<sup>37</sup> Non-Aligned Movement, 'Belgrade Declaration' (1961).

the Ministry of External Affairs notes that “Look East” was enunciated in 1992 and later embedded through expanding engagement with East and Southeast Asia<sup>38</sup>. From the 2000s into the 2010s, the dominant pattern became the pursuit of “strategic partnerships” a flexible framework enabling defense cooperation, economic ties, and political coordination without treaty alliance obligations. One recent synthesis characterizes the arc as moving from non-alignment (1947–1991) to strategic autonomy (1991–2014) and then to multi-alignment (2014–present), emphasizing continuity in the preference for avoiding exclusive alignments while expanding the partner network.<sup>39</sup> This modern multi-alignment is best described as selective, transactional, and domain-specific. A Carnegie analysis of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar’s writings and worldview underscores that India’s strategic posture is increasingly framed as pragmatic management of multiple relationships including with adversarial or competing powers rather than ideological distance from power blocs.<sup>40</sup>

### 5. Drivers of change shaping India’s external relations

India’s foreign policy behavior in the current era is driven by interacting geopolitical, economic, security, and domestic variables. Geopolitically, the system-wide diffusion of power and the intensification of major-power competition creates both opportunity and constraint. The “multiplex” framing argues that global governance is no longer centered on a single liberal order but is increasingly shaped by overlapping orders and contestation from within and outside the West conditions that expand the value of flexible coalitions.<sup>41</sup> A principal driver is the rise and assertiveness of China, which has sharpened India’s threat perceptions and raised the salience of deterrence, infrastructure resilience, and maritime posture. The 2020 border incident and the discussions on the rules of patrolling the border are considered a turning point in the relationship between the two countries and led to India’s need to better manage its relations with the outside world.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the diplomatic efforts of India in dealing with China are based on a combination of competition and cooperation, due to economic ties and the high cost of escalation. In terms of economy, the ambition of India to become a great power depends on efficient supply chains, investments, access to cutting-edge technology, and energy security.<sup>43</sup> *NonAlignment 2.0* highlights domestic development as central to global influence and stresses that sustained strategic autonomy requires careful control of external, especially energy-related, dependencies. The growing importance of energy statecraft also shows the way sanctions regimes and fluctuating commodity markets subject India to competing pressures from different partners. This requires ongoing policy adjustment rather than fixed or rigid alignment. Correspondingly, India’s security concerns now extend well beyond conventional land-based threats. India’s maritime environment spanning sea lanes, disaster response, and anti-piracy or domain awareness has become a core arena for influence. India’s SAGAR vision (Security and Growth for All in the Region) has been explicitly used by Indian leadership to describe desired outcomes for the Indian Ocean region, tying regional security to prosperity and partnership.<sup>44</sup> Domestic political factors shape both priorities and signaling: leadership preferences, an emphasis on delivering tangible benefits from partnerships, and a political premium on visible status in international forums all

<sup>38</sup> S D Muni, *India’s Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension* (Cambridge University Press 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (India), ‘Look East Policy’ official archive.

<sup>40</sup> Ashley J Tellis, ‘India as a Leading Power’ (Carnegie Endowment 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Dhruva Jaishankar, ‘India’s Foreign Policy Strategy’ (Carnegie India Report).

<sup>42</sup> Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Polity Press 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices* (Penguin 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Sunil Khilnani and others, *NonAlignment 2.0* (Centre for Policy Research 2012).

influence foreign policy choices.<sup>45</sup> India's official framing of a "people-centric" foreign policy and its emphasis on development outcomes for partners are also used to legitimate leadership claims in the Global South.

## 6. Multi-alignment in practice through minilaterals, Indo-Pacific strategy, and major-power engagement

India's contemporary statecraft can be read as the operationalization of multi-alignment: participation in overlapping forums to reduce dependence, diversify options, and gain leverage across issues. The most famous example of a minilateral arrangement is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which Australia officially describes as a partnership aimed at delivering practical cooperation in areas such as maritime security, cyber issues, critical and emerging technologies, economic security, and regional disaster response.<sup>46</sup> The Quad's official statements indicate a shift from strategic dialogue toward public goods delivery and capacity building, consistent with wider minilateral governance approaches.<sup>47</sup> India's continued engagement in alternative groupings also reflects "multi-arena" diplomacy, including the BRICS bloc and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where the emphasis is often on reform of global economic governance, development finance, and security consultation rather than alliance commitments.<sup>48</sup> The practical implication is that India can seek agenda alignment with different partners on different issues without full strategic convergence overall. India's Indo-Pacific approach provides the regional framework binding much of this together. Official speeches describe India's Indo-Pacific vision as open, inclusive, and grounded in international law, with an emphasis on connectivity and cooperative security. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative announced at the East Asia Summit explicitly proposes sectoral cooperation led by interested partners and designed to be open, inclusive, and stepwise, mirroring a minilateral/plurilateral design logic rather than rigid bloc formation.<sup>49</sup> Engagement with major powers is the second operational pillar of strategic autonomy. India's approach is best described as asymmetric multi-partnering: deepening cooperation where interests align while resisting alliance-like constraints. Relations with the United States have expanded through defense cooperation, technology links, and convergence on some Indo-Pacific security objectives, while still displaying periodic friction on trade, energy, and autonomy-related positions.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, India's long-standing relationship with the Russian Federation remains significant in defense and energy, even as dependence is gradually reduced through diversification.<sup>51</sup> India views defence partnerships as highly significant, and the complex politics of energy sourcing under sanctions explains why India favors multi-alignment to cut down on large uncertainties. The India-EU dialogue has been more focused on trade, technology regulations, and strategic partnerships. This includes the India-EU Trade and Technology Council, established to address the rapidly shifting geopolitics and to connect trade, trusted technology, and security.<sup>52</sup> India partners with Japan and Australia because they have common objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. They have collaborated in frameworks such as the Quad, which aims at maritime security, resilience, connectivity,

<sup>45</sup> Narendra Modi, 'SAGAR Vision Speech' (Indian Ocean Conference).

<sup>46</sup> Harsh V Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy in a Unipolar World* (Routledge 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Australian Government DFAT, 'Quad Partnership Overview'.

<sup>48</sup> Moisés Naím, 'Minilateralism' (2009) *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>49</sup> BRICS Summit Declarations; SCO Charter documents.

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (India), Indo-Pacific policy speeches.

<sup>51</sup> East Asia Summit, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative statement.

<sup>52</sup> US-India Joint Statements on Defence Cooperation.

and the development of regional capabilities.<sup>53</sup> Finally, India's regional diplomacy places exceptional weight on Association of Southeast Asian Nations centrality, reflecting the logic that multipolar orders are shaped through regional institutions and legitimacy, not only through great-power bargains.<sup>54</sup>

## 7. Global governance reform, constraints, and testable propositions

India's strategy in a multipolar world is not only about partnership diversification; it is also about reshaping institutions whose design reflects older power distributions. India repeatedly frames reform of global governance especially the UN Security Council and global financial institutions as necessary to reflect "contemporary realities."<sup>55</sup> On the UN track, India's official parliamentary responses emphasize that obtaining permanent membership in an expanded United Nations Security Council remains a high priority and assert that India has the credentials for permanent membership in a reformed Council.<sup>56</sup> India also works through coalitions such as the G4, which continues to issue joint statements and press lines arguing for comprehensive reform and stronger representativeness.<sup>57</sup> From these materials, several theoretically grounded propositions emerge for research design (each framed as an inference anchored in the cited literature and official statements):

1. India's strategic autonomy will increase when diplomatic diversification reduces single-source dependencies in energy and defense procurement, consistent with the "dependency constrains autonomy" logic in Non-Alignment 2.0 and observed diversification trends in arms supply. Engagement in minilateral groupings is likely to accelerate particularly in issue areas where achieving broad multilateral consensus is difficult or resource-intensive—such as maritime domain awareness, resilient supply chains, and technology standards. This approach is in line with the logic of minilateralism, which prefers limited membership in order to maximize strategic effectiveness, and the results-oriented approach of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.
2. India's China policy is likely to emerge as more balance assertively in the wake of serious border crises or forceful incidents, while at the same time maintaining engagement channels. This is because the above approach is in line with the logic of competition through engagement that is embedded in the narratives of the Indo-Pacific region and the post-2020 agenda of ensuring border stability.
3. India's leadership role in the Global South will be most credible when it is associated with specific institutional or material deliverables (summit organization, development partnerships, public goods), in keeping with the stated aim and repetition of the Voice of Global South and India's G20 presidency narratives. Cumulatively, these dynamics provide a coherent theoretical framework: India is a strategically autonomous middle power with major power ambitions in a multipolar/multiplex context where influence is multiplied through coalition entrepreneurship, minilateralism, and domain-specific leadership, but is also subject to constraints rooted in development, dependency, and hard security rivalry.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database reports.

<sup>54</sup> European Commission, India–EU Trade and Technology Council documents.

<sup>55</sup> UNGA Res A/RES/69/131.

<sup>56</sup> World Bank Migration and Development Brief.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of External Affairs parliamentary responses on UNSC reform.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew F Cooper, Richard A Higgott and Kim Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers* (UBC Press 1993).