

India's Non-Alignment Policy in a Multipolar World: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The foundational pillar of India's foreign policy, non-alignment, has undergone a significant transformation since its inception during the Cold War. Originally designed to navigate a bipolar world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, the policy aimed to preserve India's sovereignty and developmental focus without becoming a pawn in superpower rivalries (Acharya, 2014). However, the 21st century has ushered in a complex multipolar landscape characterized by the rise of China, a reasserted Russia, and the strategic volatility of the United States. This article analyses the transition from traditional Non-Alignment to "Multi-alignment" a pragmatic approach where India seeks issue-based partnerships with competing power blocs. By examining India's simultaneous engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the BRICS alliance, the study highlights how India leverages its growing economic and military weight to maintain "Strategic Autonomy." The research identifies key challenges, including the sharpening India-China border dispute, the pressure of Western sanctions on Russia, and the risk of being caught in a "middle-income trap" of diplomatic dependency (Pant & Joshi, 2026). Conversely, it explores opportunities for India to emerge as a "Vishwa Bandhu" (Global Friend) and a bridge between the Global North and South. The article concludes that while the nomenclature of non-alignment has faded, its core essence of independent decision-making remains the North Star of Indian diplomacy.

Keywords: Multi-alignment, Strategic Autonomy, Multipolarity, Indo-Pacific, Global South, Foreign Policy.

1. Introduction

India's foreign policy has historically been defined by the doctrine of non-alignment, a concept pioneered by Jawaharlal Nehru to safeguard the interests of newly independent states (Mohan, 2026). In the mid-20th century, non-alignment served as a moral and strategic shield, allowing India to focus on domestic nation-building while avoiding the "entangling alliances" of the Cold War. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise of a unipolar moment, followed by the current shift toward multipolarity, necessitated a radical recalibration of this stance.

In the 21st century, the international system is no longer defined by two opposing ideologies but by a "multiplex" of overlapping interests and rivalries (Acharya, 2021). The emergence of China as a global hegemon and its aggressive posturing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has forced New Delhi to

move beyond the idealistic neutrality of the past. Today, India practices what scholars' term "multi-alignment," characterized by a "strategic mix of cooperation and competition" (Jaishankar, 2020). This involves deepening security ties with the West through the QUAD while maintaining robust energy and defence links with Russia, and simultaneously leading the "Voice of Global South" (Pathak, 2026).

The challenge for 21st-century India lies in balancing these seemingly contradictory relationships. For instance, India's continued reliance on Russian S-400 missile systems while seeking high-tech defence transfers from the United States creates a "strategic friction" that tests the limits of its autonomy (Khanna & Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, the 50% tariffs imposed by the United States in late 2025 on Indian exports have introduced a new layer of economic volatility, highlighting the transactional nature of modern partnerships (Kewalramani, 2026). This article explores how India navigates these turbulent waters, transforming the legacy of non-alignment into a proactive strategy of engagement that prioritizes national interest over ideological purity.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on India's foreign policy evolution is categorized into three primary waves. The first wave focuses on the Nehruvian era, where non-alignment was viewed as a "moral imperative" and a tool for decolonization (Acharya, 2014). Scholars in this phase argue that NAM provided India with the "diplomatic space" to interact with both blocs for developmental aid. The second wave emerged post-1991, discussing "Strategic Autonomy." Mohan (2006) argues that India moved from "idealistic non-alignment" to a "pragmatic realism," evidenced by the 2008 Civil Nuclear Deal with the US. Hall (2019) notes that during the Modi administration, this shifted further into "multi-alignment," where India no longer seeks equidistance but "Equi proximity"—engaging all major powers to maximize benefits. The third and current wave (2023–2026) addresses the "China Challenge" and "Global South Leadership." Pant and Saha (2025) emphasize that the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 was a "watershed moment" that ended India's "strategic hesitation" regarding the US. However, Zoya Hasan (2026) warns that closer structural alignment with Washington might erode the very "Strategic Autonomy" India seeks to protect. Recent studies by the Observer Research Foundation (2025) suggest that India's G20 presidency in 2023 and subsequent leadership in the "Voice of Global South" summits represent a "NAM 2.0," focusing on developmental justice, climate finance, and digital public infrastructure rather than military neutrality.

3. Research Gap

While extensive literature exists on the transition from NAM to Multi-alignment, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding how India manages asymmetric interdependence in a post-2025 world marked by intense trade wars and technological decoupling. Most studies focus on security or economy in isolation; few examine the "synergistic impact" of US trade penalties (e.g., the 2025 tariffs) on India's willingness to re-engage diplomatically with China (Kewalramani, 2026). This research fills the gap by providing a holistic analysis of India's "strategic hedging" between the US, Russia, and China in the current year.

4. Objectives

- 4.1 To analyse the evolution of India's Non-Alignment policy into a "multi-alignment" framework in the context of 21st-century multipolarity.
- 4.2 To evaluate the specific challenges posed by the US-China rivalry and the opportunities for India to

lead the Global South.

5. Research Methods and Material

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical method grounded in the "Realist" school of international relations. The research utilizes primary materials, including official statements from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), G20 and BRICS summit declarations (2023-2025), and secondary data from peer-reviewed journals like *International Affairs* and *The Indian Journal of Political Science*. Data analysis involves a "Textual Network Analysis" (TNA) of policy documents from 2020 to 2026 to track shifts in diplomatic terminology from "neutrality" to "strategic autonomy" (ResearchGate, 2026).

6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of India's foreign policy in the 21st century is best understood through a synthesis of **Neorealism**, **Constructivism**, and the emerging concept of "**Multiplexity**." While the original Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was rooted in a mixture of anti-colonial idealism and defensive realism, the contemporary framework has shifted toward a more proactive, interest-based paradigm known as **Strategic Autonomy**.

Neorealism and the Balance of Power: From a Neorealist perspective, India's policy is a rational response to the structural constraints of a multipolar international system. According to Waltz (1979), states in an anarchic system seek to maximize their security through balancing. For India, the rise of an assertive China represents a "systemic threat" that necessitates "internal balancing" (economic and military buildup) and "external hedging" (partnerships with the US and QUAD) (Pant & Joshi, 2026). However, unlike traditional alliances, India's theoretical framework rejects "entrenchment." By maintaining ties with Russia and participating in the BRICS+ and SCO, India practices "**Soft Balancing**"—using non-military tools and international institutions to ensure that no single power (neither the US nor China) establishes absolute hegemony (Acharya, 2021). **Constructivism and the "Vishwa Bandhu" Identity:** Constructivism argues that international relations are shaped by ideas, identities, and norms rather than just material power (Wendt, 1999). India's framework is deeply influenced by its identity as a "**Civilizational State**" and its historical role as the leader of the Global South. The shift from the "Strategic Hesitation" of the 20th century to the "Strategic Clarity" of the 21st century reflects a change in India's self-perception. The conceptualization of India as a "**Vishwa Bandhu**" (**Global Friend**) or a "**Leading Power**" rather than a "Balancing Power" allows New Delhi to engage with contradictory blocs without appearing ideologically inconsistent (Jaishankar, 2024). This identity-driven approach justifies India's role as a bridge between the G7 and the G77. **Acharya's Multiplex World:** A crucial theoretical lens for this study is Amitav Acharya's "**Multiplex World**" (2014). Unlike a "multipolar" world which suggests a return to 19th-century power politics, a "multiplex" world is like a multiplex cinema—multiple shows running simultaneously with different actors and plots, but all under one roof. In this framework, India does not seek to lead a "third bloc" as it did during the Cold War. Instead, it engages in "**Issue-based Coalitions**." This explains why India can be a member of the QUAD for maritime security while simultaneously working with China and Russia in the BRICS for financial multipolarity (Mohan, 2026).

7. Conceptual Analysis

The core of India's contemporary foreign policy lies in a sophisticated conceptual shift from the Cold War legacy of **Non-Alignment (NAM)** to the modern framework of **Strategic Autonomy**, operationalized

through **multi-alignment**.

Traditionally, NAM was a defensive concept, rooted in avoiding "bloc politics" and ideological conflict to preserve India's nascent sovereignty (Acharya, 2014). In the 21st century, however, this has been re-conceptualized as a proactive assertion of national interest within a fluid, multipolar international system. This new paradigm is not about equidistance (staying apart from powers) but about equiproximity—engaging all major powers simultaneously while maintaining the independent ability to make decisions (Jaishankar, 2020).

This concept is best visualized as a series of overlapping diplomatic engagements rather than a rigid linear alignment. India positions itself at the intersection of conflicting interest groups. As depicted in the illustration, India simultaneously participates in the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)** with the United States, Japan, and Australia to balance China in the Indo-Pacific, while remaining a pivotal member of the **BRICS+** and the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)** to strengthen ties with the Global South and manage continental Eurasia. This strategy of "**Strategic Hedging**" allows India to minimize risks and maximize benefits across different geographies and functional areas (Doshi, 2021). Thus, 21st-century non-alignment is conceptually about creating "circles of cooperation" rather than "axis of alignment" (Pant & Joshi, 2026).

8. Result

Results: The Efficacy of Multi-alignment in a Transformed Global Order

The empirical analysis of India's foreign policy performance between 2020 and 2026 reveals a significant shift from "strategic hesitation" to "proactive engagement." The results of this study indicate that India has successfully leveraged its "multiplex" identity to navigate the volatile US-China-Russia triangle. A primary result is the consolidation of India's role as the "South Pole" of the global economy. By hosting the "Voice of Global South" summits and integrating the African Union into the G20, India has successfully institutionalized its leadership over a demographic that represents two-thirds of humanity (Pathak, 2026).

Quantitatively, the research highlights a "dual-track" success in trade and security. Despite the geopolitical friction caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India's energy security remained stable through a 400% increase in crude oil imports from Russia between 2022 and 2025, conducted largely in non-dollar currencies to bypass Western sanctions (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Simultaneously, India's defense exports reached an all-time high of \$3 billion in 2025, driven by the sale of BrahMos missiles and Tejas aircraft to Southeast Asian and African nations, signalling a move toward "productive autonomy" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

However, the results also uncover a critical "economic friction point." The 2025-2026 trade cycle saw the United States impose significant tariffs on Indian ICT and textile exports, testing the resilience of the Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. Data suggests that while India remained a key security partner in the Indo-Pacific through the QUAD, its economic alignment with the West is increasingly transactional rather than structural (Kewalramani, 2026). Furthermore, the results regarding the India-China border suggest a "frozen peace." While military disengagement at key friction points like Demchok and Depsang was achieved by early 2026, the bilateral relationship remains "armed and wary." The study finds that India's refusal to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while remaining a lead member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) exemplifies a successful "de-risking" strategy (Pant & Joshi, 2026). Ultimately, the results demonstrate that India has avoided the "binary trap" of the 20th cen-

ture, emerging instead as a pivotal "swing power" that dictates terms rather than following them.

9. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that India's transition from traditional non-alignment to a strategy of **multi-alignment** is not merely a change in nomenclature, but a fundamental shift in how New Delhi perceives global power. The discussion centers on whether "Strategic Autonomy" can be sustained in an era of hyper-polarization between the United States and China. As argued by Jaishankar (2024), India's current posture is defined by "engaging with all major powers to achieve partisan ends." This pragmatic realism allows India to participate in the **QUAD** to check Chinese maritime expansion while simultaneously utilizing **BRICS+** to advocate for a de-dollarized global financial architecture (Observer Research Foundation, 2025).

A critical point of discussion is the **"Asymmetric Vulnerability"** India faces. While India has successfully resisted taking sides in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the increasing "Trump-era" protectionism of 2025–2026—marked by 50% tariffs on Indian exports highlights that being a "Major Defense Partner" of the U.S. does not guarantee economic immunity (Kewalramani, 2026). This suggests that India's strategic autonomy is increasingly tied to its economic self-reliance. Furthermore, the discussion reflects on India's role as the **"Vishwa Bandhu."** By positioning itself as a bridge between the Global North and South, India has successfully avoided the "middle-power trap."

However, the sustainability of this "bridge" role depends on India's ability to manage its primary security threat: China. The "armed coexistence" along the LAC remains the ultimate litmus test for multi-alignment. If the border conflict escalates, the theoretical "Equi proximity" may collapse, forcing a structural lean toward the West (Pant & Joshi, 2026). Ultimately, the discussion underscores that for India, Non-Alignment in the 21st century is about **"alignment with issues, not with camps."**

10. Suggestions

India must accelerate its **"Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India)** initiative, particularly in the defense and semiconductor sectors, to reduce vulnerabilities to external sanctions or supply chain disruptions. Diplomatically, India should institutionalize the "Voice of Global South" into a permanent consultative body to ensure it remains the bridge between the West and the developing world. Furthermore, New Delhi should seek a "Grand Bargain" with China that decoupling from the US is possible only if border stability is permanently restored, thereby leveraging the US-China rivalry to its advantage.

11. Conclusion

India's non-alignment has not died; it has evolved. In the 21st century, it is less about "avoiding blocs" and more about "creating circles of interest." The shift to multi-alignment has empowered India to navigate a world where traditional alliances are crumbling. While the path ahead is fraught with challenges—from Himalayan border tensions to Western trade protectionism—India's ability to maintain independent judgment remains its greatest asset. By staying "aligned with itself," India can ensure its rise as a leading pole in a truly multipolar world.

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