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Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

India's Strategic Autonomy:

A Special Feature

Editors: Pankaj Saran & Raj Kumar Sharma

GEOPOLITICS | SECURITY | TECHNOLOGY & ECONOMY

January 2026

NatStrat

Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

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About NatStrat

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues.

Vision

The 21st century is upon us. The post-World War II global architecture is becoming unsustainable. The international security and strategic environment is changing. The centre of gravity of global influence is shifting, and new powers are emerging. India is one of them.

Despite the odds, India has withstood internal and external challenges to preserve its democratic and constitutional ethos. Its diversity and pluralism have grown while being firmly rooted in its civilisational heritage. As a result, the states of India are more empowered today than before. More than half its population, larger than the combined size of Europe and the US, is under the age of thirty.

The transformation underway in India will unleash powerful impulses beyond India's borders. This will profoundly impact the world's political, social, cultural and economic systems. As India rises and finds its rightful place on the world stage, its unique identity, traditions and value systems will become critical to global peace and stability.

India is looking ahead to mark the centenary year of its post-independence existence. How India thinks will matter. How India acts will matter even more. The success of India is crucial to humankind.

We seek to understand the domestic and external security challenges facing India and what drives India's strategic calculations. We will ask the right questions without fear or favour and provide our views and insights fearlessly.

We will bring an authentic Indian perspective to understanding the world. We aim to make India's voice heard and count in the international community.

Aims and Objectives

NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology, and economy.

NatStrat's research is objective, impartial and rigorous. It upholds the highest standards of excellence and scrutiny.

NatStrat seeks to reach out to decision-makers, policymakers, practitioners and the strategic community within and outside India. It engages with international counterparts and with institutions and scholars across India.

NatStrat will produce a variety of material, including research papers, commentaries, monographs and policy briefs. Its contributors are authoritative and experienced professionals of international repute and acclaim. It also promotes new and fresh perspectives by encouraging young thinkers to write and work for it. As part of its activities, NatStrat hosts seminars, round table discussions, lectures, podcasts and interviews.

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Foreword

How does one explain Indian foreign policy to those who have grown up in a world of binaries - of us versus them, of good versus evil and of right versus wrong, and of alliances and groupings? For them, nations need to have only two choices. A third path is unnecessary, immoral, or opportunistic. There is at the same time a much larger set of countries, those that constitute the developing world, who have a different view of how the world is or ought to be arranged. They hold dear their freedom to choose friends even as they resent the reality of limits to such choice. Then there are others who regard themselves as too big to belong to a camp, either because of their geographic and economic attributes or civilizational ethos, or both. Like the nine blind men touching an elephant, countries see different parts of the same landscape and live different realities.

Since 1947, various terms have been used to describe Indian foreign policy. None of these has been able to fully capture its totality - what drives it, what are its objectives, what is its underlying strategy or its underlying intellectual framework. When the times are good, India is off the radar, but when the world faces crises, the spotlight shifts to India. As India becomes systemically more significant, its actions come under greater scrutiny.

In the last few years, considerable attention has been paid to Indian foreign policy, not only because of the position India has taken on the Ukraine conflict, but also on other intractable conflicts in West Asia and the Gulf. Governments and commentators have analyzed India's choices, objectives and priorities. Views have ranged from criticism to misrepresentation. I chanced upon an essay in The Foreign Affairs (Volume 27 Number 4) published in July 1949 titled "India as a World Power" ascribed to "an Indian official" which is a most relevant read in today's context. Such exposition of Indian thought was useful at that time. It is perhaps even more necessary today.

NatStrat therefore decided to ask a group of Indian scholars and officials and policy makers who have been at the helm of affairs to take time out and tell us how they see Indian foreign policy today and what is their interpretation of the concept of the much-used term "strategic autonomy". Do they believe it is a faithful description of what guides Indian foreign policy? What forms has it taken in the last few decades? Is it a dogma or has it evolved over time? Is the conceptual clarity between strategic autonomy as an approach and strategic autonomy as an objective well understood? Does it command national consensus? Is strategic autonomy unique to India? And finally, has it served India's interests?

There could be no better time than now for such an exercise. The world is in disarray. The most powerful nation on earth has broken itself free from the discipline of international rules and norms and obligations towards allies and friends. It is reminding the world on a daily basis about what extreme American exceptionalism or an absolutist form of autonomous behaviour can look like. Other major powers, such as Russia in Ukraine and China as the world's manufacturing hegemon, are also acting unilaterally and without restraint. Europe has been forced out of the comfort of its trans-Atlantic alliance, and is discovering what it means to be on your own in the rough and tumble of geopolitics. In this world of 'to each his own', the United Nations stands as a mute and helpless spectator. The world itself has become an 'ungoverned space'.

Is strategic autonomy the new doctrine for today's world?

Disorder is leading to fragmentation of the world order. But the disorder is hydra headed in nature. It is also characterized by the emergence of new dependencies and linkages among nations, in fields of trade, technology and raw materials. Can India pursue strategic autonomy in political relations independent of these dependencies? How is autonomy impacted in an era where everything, including currency, is weaponized? What does strategic autonomy mean when it comes to meeting core national development needs?

Nations are hedging not only against one and another but also against an unpredictable future.

One among many ways India is navigating today's complexity is by building multiple partnerships. These are region and sector specific. They sometimes appear contradictory, and perhaps are, but at a time when the path forward is not linear complexity becomes inevitable.

NatStrat is deeply grateful to all the distinguished thinkers who have contributed to this discussion. We hope this unique compilation will contribute to a better understanding of Indian foreign policy at a time of great change.

This Special Feature is dedicated to Ambassador P S Raghavan, former Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board, whose intellect, drive and contribution to Indian diplomacy will never be forgotten.

Pankaj Saran
Convenor, NatStrat

Abstract

The term "strategic autonomy" has been used to explain the core underlying principle of India's foreign policy. Today the world is in the midst of the biggest disruption to the global order since World War II. With assumptions of the past no longer remaining valid, strategic autonomy has acquired a new meaning. This is leading to a much-needed debate in India on how it should deal with the world.

In this context, NatStrat invited some of India's foremost strategic thinkers and practitioners to share their perspectives on the concept of India's strategic autonomy.

The volume has been divided into four sub-sections.

The **first section** focuses on the historical evolution of strategic autonomy.

M J Akbar, in his essay, '**Challenges before India: Strategic Autonomy and the Power of Balance'** traces the roots of India's quest for strategic autonomy to the Partition, which led to a sharp divergence between India and America following America's support to Pakistan and its utility to the American grand design. India has come a long way since then from practicing 'balance of power' to 'the power of balance'.

Suhasini Haidar, in her article, **'Why India Chooses Strategic Autonomy?'** makes the case on how geography has been the determinant of Indian foreign policy-making and influenced its post-Independence leadership to pursue Non-Alignment going back to the Bandung Conference in 1955, and how the concept of Non-Alignment has evolved from 1947 to the present.

Shyam Saran, in his piece, '**India's Strategic Autonomy - Myth or Reality?'** traces the origin of the term strategic autonomy to the conclusion of the India-US Civil Nuclear Deal, and how he used this term for the first time as Foreign Secretary in 2005-2006.

Kanwal Sibal, in his essay '**Strategic Autonomy is a Defensive Terminology**' traces the evolution of strategic autonomy as seen in the case of France and India, and how it applies currently to Indian statecraft, contrasting it with how major powers practice autonomy without using the term to describe their behaviour.

Krishnan Srinivasan, in his essay '**In Search of a Rubric for Indian Foreign Policy'** argues that the difficulty in defining Indian foreign policy is not a new one. The ideological moorings of Non-Alignment were co-terminus with Jawaharlal Nehru, and since then, have been marked by realism and pragmatism. The phrase 'independent foreign policy' is the best description of the theory and practice of Indian foreign policy.

The **second section** deals with the geopolitical aspects of strategic autonomy.

Syed Akbaruddin, in his piece, **'India's Freedom to Engage: Redefining Strategic Autonomy'** argues that strategic autonomy is not about fence-sitting but a deliberate method to navigate contested arenas. It is not about keeping distance from the world but about the freedom to shape engagements on India's own terms through sovereign choices.

M K Narayanan, in his essay, '**Strategic Autonomy & Multipolarity: Fault Lines in the Emerging Security Framework'** asserts that we are living in a hybrid world where a pluralistic global landscape is emerging. With erstwhile global institutions declining in influence and capabilities, a global re-ordering is in the works. China is today benefitting from the decline of the US.

Sanjay Pulipaka, in his article, '**Power Shifts, Alliances, and India's Strategic Autonomy'** notes that big powers focus on maintaining their spheres of influence. India's position is such that no one country can assist it in meeting all its needs, and therefore, it is important for India to diversify its strategic partnerships.

Zorawar Daulet Singh, in his essay, '**Indian Grand Strategy in a Multipolar World'** argues that a multipolar world setting will require India to develop an alternative geopolitical framework, and that for it to be part of a world

order where non-Western civilisations are seen as equal members of the international community bodes well for the evolution of Indian nationhood.

Shashi Tharoor, in his article, '**India's Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World'** notes that today India finds itself navigating a delicate path between competing giants: the United States, China and Russia, and that the pursuit of strategic autonomy, rather than being a theoretical aspiration, is a daily diplomatic practice fraught with complexity and consequence.

T S Tirumurti, in his piece, '**India's Strategic Autonomy: Role and Dimensions'** writes that strategic autonomy is also about leadership, and has been the default mode of Indian strategic thought, and there is no reason to deviate from this since it has served India well. However, there is a need for sharper focus on achieving our goals and exercising leadership.

D B Venkatesh Varma, in his essay, '**Four Dimensions of Strategic Autonomy: Their Meaning for India'** proposes a working definition of strategic autonomy and identifies its four dimensions - operational, declaratory, economic and technological, and societal. These are mutually reinforcing although the yardstick of success lies in its operational dimension, without which, the other three would fail into insignificance.

The **third section** deals with economic and technological aspects of strategic autonomy.

Jawed Ashraf, in his essay, '**Reinforcing India's Strategic Autonomy for the New Global Disorder'** makes a strong case for India's external engagement to place priority on assured access to critical minerals, energy, technology and the building block of the new age – semiconductors and AI, as well as alternative cross-border payment channels and mechanisms.

Surya Kanegaonkar, in his article, **'India's Strategic Autonomy: A Guarantor of National Stability, Security and Growth'** draws attention to the fact that India's strategic autonomy has direct economic implications. By not binding itself to the procurement practices or regulatory constraints of any one bloc, India can negotiate technology partnerships, natural resource investment and procurement deals, defense ties and trade pacts keeping its core interests at center stage.

Amitabh Kant, in his piece, '**The Case for Strategic Autonomy'** notes that strategic autonomy spans the economic, energy, technological, and geopolitical domains. Economic autonomy requires stable trade relationships, a competitive manufacturing sector, and resilient supply chains. In a world where tariffs are being weaponised and export controls are restricting trade, economic autonomy gains prominence.

Ashok Malik, in his essay, '**India's Strategic Autonomy in Practice: Supply Chains, Technology, and Power'** identifies three determinants that matter in fine-tuning strategic autonomy in the Trumpian age: geography; supply chains; and technology. Strategic autonomy in building a secure and non-threatening near-neighbourhood, strategic autonomy in supply chains, and strategic autonomy in technology choices are imperatives.

V K Saraswat, in his piece '**Strategic Autonomy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence'** cautions that in the age of AI, control of borders, military strength, and adequacy of natural resources are not the only parameters for strategic autonomy. It is determined by control over data and algorithms, computing infrastructure like data centers , and the human skills to govern complex machine systems.

The **fourth section** contains case studies that illustrate the practice of strategic autonomy.

Swati Arun, in her article, '**Hedging Without Punishment: Vietnam, India, and the Unequal Burden of Strategic Autonomy'** takes the case of Vietnam, which manages multiple partnerships with competing powers, as an example of the practice of strategic autonomy, how it compares to India and what lessons it has for India.

Raj Kumar Sharma, in his piece, '**Strategic Autonomy: A Case Study of India's BRICS Membership'** argues how BRICS plays a significant role in strengthening India's strategic autonomy and expanding its foreign policy choices, and the challenges it faces in doing so.

The Evolution

CHALLENGES BEFORE INDIA: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND THE POWER OF BALANCE

M J Akbar

President of India, Pranab Mukherjee ((7th from left), the Vice President of India, Mohd. Hamid Ansari (6th from left) and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi with the Heads of SAARC countries after the Swearing-in Ceremony, at Rashtrapati Bhavan, in New Delhi on May 26, 2014. | President's Secretariat.

India, the US & Accident of History

The strategic distance between India and the United States—two nations that have never been at war and are unlikely ever to be—remains a paradox of contemporary geopolitics. This is compounded by Washington's continuing support to Pakistan, an unstable jelly-state held piece-meal by an Army which flaunts Jihad as its official motto, faith supremacism as its ideology, and has given support and sanctuary to America's most vitriolic 21st century enemy, the terrorist Osama bin Laden; little could be more antithetical to America's proclaimed values.

One reason lies in an accident of history. Between 1947 and 1948, a coincidence made India and the United States principal advocates of parallel world views.

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that India, free from British rule by August 1947, needed to preserve its independence through a vigilant foreign policy which maintained a distance from military blocs that served to perpetuate global conflict. Within weeks of freedom, Nehru sent a message to the American magazine *New Republic* asserting unambiguously that India would "avoid entanglement in any blocs or groups of Powers" because blocs fomented war.

Washington dismissed this as woolly-headed piety which had no place in the hard and harsh reality of the gathering Cold War between the liberal-democratic West and doctrinaire Communist Soviet Union.

America, invigorated by the concept of Thomas Jefferson's "empire for liberty", decided that freedoms saved from Nazi fascism and Japanese imperialism could only be protected by the subversion and defeat of Communism, which had spread across a contiguous swathe of territory from eastern Germany to China. By 1950, Communism spearheaded by Stalin in Moscow and Mao Zedong in Beijing, was actively pursuing expansion in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Jefferson considered liberty an obligation, but such a moral-political responsibility was beyond American capabilities in the 19th century: while European colonizers throttled liberty around the globe, Americans prioritized the search for internal settler-wealth. The American mind changed after two World Wars. Perched on the high altitude of leadership, libertarian America mobilized to fight the Cold War, unwilling to concede space to neutrality, dividing the world into the binary of 'us' versus 'them'. Neutrality was appeasement.

The strategic objectives of India and America were driven by compulsions which did not necessarily collide but could not ever harmonize. The distance widened through the 1950s. When the Cold War edged towards a nuclear catastrophe over the Berlin crisis between 1958 and 1962, Nehru argued that India would not avoid engagement with the Soviet bloc for fear of America, and if Washington became unfriendly as a result, India would seek friends elsewhere.

In the autumn of 1962, a shocked Nehru discovered that there was no 'elsewhere' for India after Chinese aggression across the Himalayas. Catastrophic defeat opened eyes and minds in Delhi. India recalibrated its strategic thinking. Independence needed more than ideals; it required the concrete reinforcement of robust security, or, to coin a term, 'defendence': the ability to establish defence mechanisms, including weapons and pacts, based on the logic of national self-interest without surrender of autonomy.

America was willing to help in the immediate aftermath of 1962, for till the split with Russia, China was part of the Sino-Soviet phalanx. But Anglo-American equivocation over Kashmir as they attempted to obtain the best terms for their ally Pakistan, and the supply of sophisticated arms on generous terms to the Pakistan army intent on further aggression against India, rebuilt the walls of mistrust.

In 1965, Pakistan bolstered by state-of-the-art American Patton tanks, launched another invasion of Jammu and Kashmir. India defeated its *bete noire* with ageing Centurions, M4 Shermans and the PT-76 as supplementary armour purchased from Russia. After 1965, India turned towards Moscow. The Indo-Soviet defence treaty was signed in 1971, on the eve of the third and most decisive war with Pakistan.

Ironically, in 1796 America's founding father George Washington had advised his successors to "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world" to protect America's autonomy and instead "safely trust temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies". This is what India did.

Pakistan was never ambiguous towards the Pentagon. It remained loyal to what should be called the Jinnah Gambit.

The Pakistan movement was never driven by the urge to end British rule; Muhammad Ali Jinnah wanted freedom from Hindus, the locus standi of partition. In 1946, Jinnah told a press conference in Cairo that "Hindu India" would be a greater "menace for the future"

than British power had ever been. Such thinking translated seamlessly into a partisan foreign policy in which Pakistan's security needs were purchased by subservience to American strategic requirements.

The Jinnah Gambit

Jinnah's security thesis was built around reductive reasoning: Pakistan could not survive without a powerful ally. The Communist Soviet Union was atheist, and hence anti-Islam; France had become weak; Britain was crippled. The only rational option was America. In November 1946, Jinnah sent his friend and financier M A H Ispahani to test American waters. Ispahani reported that Americans liked "sweet words" and first impressions mattered. They still do.

In September 1947, Jinnah told an influential American journalist reporting from the subcontinent, Margaret Bourke-White of *Life* magazine: "America needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs America. Pakistan is the pivot of the world as we are placed – the future on which the future of the world revolves." He added with a satisfied smile that Russia was not that far away. Pakistan was ready to become a Western base for "Middle Eastern defence" against the southward advance of the Soviet Union. He could hardly have been more categorical for an audience in Washington which believed in strategic clarity as a moral virtue.

Jinnah's first manoeuvre was audacious. In September 1947, or about a month before Jinnah ordered the first war for Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan sent a formal request to Charles Lewis, the American *charge d'affaires* in Karachi, for two billion dollars in aid spread over five years. Pakistan's leaders have never underestimated the sale price of Pakistan.

The money took time, but the message travelled fast. In the summer of 1950, American President Harry Truman sent a plane to London for Jinnah's successor Liaquat Ali Khan and received him personally in Washington on 3 May at the onset of the first formal state visit by a Pakistan Prime Minister. Khan pledged full support against Communism and voted against North Korea at the United Nations. Truman is well-known for saying that if you want a friend in Washington, you should get a pet dog. If you want an ally, however, there is plenty of company. Khan's overtures were music after the lectures America heard from Nehru during his month-long visit in October 1949.

On 5 January 1954, President Eisenhower authorized military aid to Pakistan; on 19 May 1954, America and Pakistan signed the Mutual Defence Agreement in Karachi, and America gained access to facilities near Peshawar for its air force and CIA. In 1956, Pakistan supported the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion to take the Suez Canal from Egypt. Two years later, the first military dictator of Pakistan Ayub Khan seized power in a coup; American approval came with Eisenhower's visit to Pakistan in December 1959. Till this day, America uses its Pakistan base for military action when it chooses; Pakistan does not intervene because it cannot.

India has never surrendered its autonomy, not even in the aftermath of 1962. That is why,

There is not much difference between Truman's dispatch of an American plane for Liaquat Ali Khan in 1950 and President Donald Trump's lunch invitation to Field Marshal Asim Munir, the de facto ruler of Pakistan, in 2025. Both are token public gestures to signal a hard alliance. Washington understands that there is some collateral damage from Pakistan's ideological willingness to provide a sanctuary for Islamist radicals and terrorists but merely seeks to ensure, not always successfully, that this is not targeted towards America.

Pakistan is an ally of America and India is only a friend.

Munir is the most hardline defender of faith-supremacy and benefactor of terrorism in Pakistan's history. His speech on 15 April, 2025 to non-resident Pakistanis could hardly be more specific: Pakistanis, wherever they may reside, should never forget that they belong to a "superior ideology and superior culture". America has not even demanded the release of the man who helped CIA to trace Osama bin Laden; Dr Shakil Afridi continues to rot in a Pakistan jail as a "traitor". Pakistan is also permitted a bandwidth within which it can take its conflict with India as far as possible.

There is, however, an unresolved contradiction at the heart of Islamism in the modern era, identified by Ayatollah Khomeini, ideologue and mentor of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Khomeini noted in 1979 that "Islam is opposed to nationalism. Nationalism means we want the nation; we want nationalism and not Islam." He and his disciples have never forsaken Iran's national interest in any quest of an international Jihad. When a Jihad suits Iran's interests, it is useful; when it does not, it is dispensable.

Neither has Iran abandoned its pre-Islamic legacy, unlike Pakistan. On 24 November, 2025, *The Times*, London reported a public event in Tehran's Revolution Square celebrating the potential fate of Iran's enemies. The iconic image on display was of the Roman emperor Valerian on his knees before the Persian King Shapur. "Kneel before Iranians", said the caption. Shapur the First [215-270] was not a Muslim. He defeated Valerian in 260 at Edessa. Another image of the famous scene, now at the Getty museum, shows Shapur mounting his horse by stepping on the back of Valerian.

Pakistan is led by ideologues who believe their history starts with the Arab invasion of Sindh in 711, which established a foothold on the subcontinent but left little long-term impact. Pakistan is a confused and dysfunctional state because it has abandoned its heritage of the Indus valley civilization, Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and Gandhara only because they are pre-Islamic. Pakistan has made Islam co-terminus with nationalism.

If Islam was sufficient as the basis for a nation state, why would there be 22 Arab countries? In November 2025, Islamabad argued at the Istanbul peace talks with Afghanistan that an Afghan attack on Pakistan was against *sharia* since Pakistan was an "Islamic" state. The Afghan Taliban *mullahs* laughed all the way back to Kabul.

Faith is an individual relationship with God; politics feeds on much baser metrics. There has never been solidarity in any religion, whether Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Confucianism, in the name of faith. Solidarity is possible only when mutual worldly benefits beckon.

Eyebrows were raised, some sharply, at news of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabian defence pact. A few overheated egos in Islamabad began to talk of an Islamic NATO with its version of Article 5 which would force the money-rich Arab world to come to Pakistan's aid against India. The Saudis, who write the cheques, are not threatened by India. Their threat is from Israel or Iran. The Saudis are in no hurry to send their air force to the subcontinent; instead, if there is any military movement, Pakistani brigades might end up in the desert wondering which version of Islamism is their enemy.

The dynasties who rule in the Arab world recognise that radical Islamists who want a return to a Caliphate do not recognise either borders or kingdoms and see Emirs as pliant instruments of the hated West. On 23 November, 2025, the British magazine *Spectator* posted a report on its website headlined 'ISIS is stirring once more'. ISIS, the most organized and dangerous of radical groups, has begun to use artificial intelligence to recruit new fighters; a decade ago it used Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, with videos of beheadings while ruling over territory the size of Britain across Iraq and Syria until it was defeated by a US-led coalition in 2019. Defeat did not mean elimination.

The ghost caliphate has maintained arms depots and built relationships with desert tribes and clans, particularly in the Karachok

mountain chain of Iraq and Deir al Zur in Syria. It continues an indoctrination programme in camps where former ISIS families have been relocated.

Hayat Tahrir al Shyam, which has cobbled together a government in Damascus after the overthrow of the Assad regime, was once an ally of ISIS. Its leader Ahmed al Sharaa has put on a tie to honour the dress code of the Trump White House, and is backed by the Arab Gulf, but there are questions over how much actual territory it controls. The Gaza war has reignited support for ISIS.

The Age of India: Rise of a Benevolent Power

The central challenge before India has been to prove that Indian nationalism can guarantee the security and prosperity of its people and take India to the high table of the 21st century. The latest statistics from the World Bank indicate that poverty in India has been virtually erased. Over the last decade, India has also sustained the largest welfare schemes in recorded history, most notably providing sufficient food to 800 million people and expanding tech availability to over a billion, a remarkable digital expansion. For the body politic to function at the level of people's expectations in a democracy, both hands must be muscular: economy and military.

The change is visible, if not always recognised. During the first decade of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, India has emerged as a benevolent power with a steel backbone. It rejects war as regressive but understands the meaning of Bismarck's aphorism: an invading army at the border will not be stopped by eloquence.

> **On Wednesday 10 July, 2024, Prime Minister Modi said at a meeting with Indian diaspora in Vienna that India had given the world Buddha, not yuddha, or war: "For thousands of years, we have been sharing our knowledge and expertise. We didn't give 'Yuddha', we gave the world Buddha. India always gave peace and prosperity, and therefore, India is going to strengthen its role in the 21st century." As Mahatma Gandhi noted, dryly, an eye for an eye would leave everyone blind.**

India has been a first responder in any humanitarian crisis, playing a striking role during the Covid crisis and reaching out with

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the International Abhidhamma Divas programme, in New Delhi, on October 17, 2024. | PTI.

immediate aid during any natural calamity within the range of its extended neighbourhood. Prime Minister Modi has changed the meaning of neighbour, redefining it by goodwill and reach rather than proximity. The new arc of neighbours extends from the Gulf to the Malacca straits; Pakistan is a presence, not a neighbour. Modi has established a *swadeshi* foreign policy, which harmonizes national economic and political interests with partnership for a better world. Multinationals, to give one example, engage with India on India's terms because they appreciate that it is mutually beneficial. If they want the Indian market, they must learn to make in India. The so-called superpowers now understand that while India can be persuaded, it cannot be bullied or threatened.

India has met the challenge of economic development through a turbulent growth story. The 1970s were stagnant, touched by the malign odour of stale socialism that had long passed its sell-by date. It was only in the mid-1980s that a younger generation began to strike out towards change and took the first hesitant steps towards reform. The pace might have been faster but for the cataclysmic upsurge of secessionist forces and hostile insurgencies which led to the assassination of two Prime Ministers, Mrs Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

Economic reform in the 1990s began to open the doors to entrepreneurial creativity, but the passage towards a new horizon took time to clear. India found itself in the 21st century, of which the decade between 2015 and 2025 has witnessed a series of breakthrough advances in the collective health of the people and the nation. India is on its way to meeting its greatest challenge: a *Viksit Bharat*, or a developed nation, by 2047.

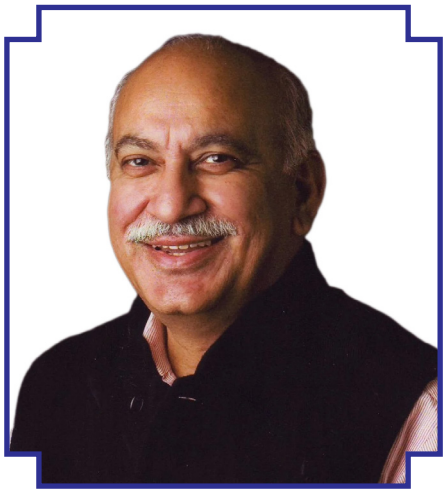
India was once caricatured as a combination of lofty hot air and low delivery. The nadir was in the 1960s. The low point in relations with Pakistan came during bilateral talks in 1963 when India offered Poonch, Uri, Kishanganga, and the Neelam valley to Pakistan as a final settlement. This arbitrary offer seems unbelievable today, but facts sit patiently in the archives. Even more incredible is that Pakistan's leaders, consumed by the hubris that drove them to war in 1965, rejected this option.

Today, Pakistan has shifted the conflict with India from set-piece battles between conventional armies to the continuous bleed of terrorism. India has made it clear that there cannot be two laws, one where America or its allies can pursue their quarry across borders, but advises restraint when India is attacked by terrorists. India seeks justice after a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist outrage, not arbitrary revenge. Weakness, whether economic, diplomatic or military, is now a distant memory.

The world has long been in thrall to empirical theories like 'balance of power'. In a quiet but methodical style, India is exhibiting through its policies the power of balance. The principal motives for aggression have not changed much through history: ambition, ideology, and the compulsive temptation of supremacy. 'Balance of power' seeks equality in aggression, on the assumption that it is the natural impulse of state behaviour.

> **Narendra Modi's search for equilibrium in international relations is linked by five interconnected principles: respect (samman) for every nation; dialogue (samvad) as the basis of conflict-resolution; security (suraksha) as a pillar of stability; prosperity (samriddhi) through domestic effort and international cooperation; and cultural harmony (sanskriti) as a civilizational virtue.**

It is time for the world to discover the power of balance.



M J Akbar

M J Akbar is an Indian journalist, author, and politician who served as the Minister of State for External Affairs from 2016 to 2018. He was elected to Rajya Sabha from Jharkhand in July 2015. During his long and illustrious career in journalism, he launched, as editor, India's first weekly political news periodicals, including India Today, Headlines Today, The Telegraph, The Asian Age and Deccan Chronicle, among others. He is author of several books including *India: The Siege Within: Challenges to a Nation's Unity, Tinderbox: The Past and Future of Pakistan, Doolally Sahib and the Black Zamindar: Racism and Revenge in the British Raj* and *The Shade of Swords*.

WHY INDIA CHOOSES STRATEGIC AUTONOMY?

Suhasini Haidar

Representative Map. | mapsofworld.com.

"To know a country's geography is to be able to predict its foreign policy", French Emperor Napoleon is believed to have said. And yet, this most fundamental basis for the course India has charted over eighty years, is often ignored - whether it is referred to as non-alignment, multipolarity, Global South solidarity, or strategic autonomy.

India's Geography Defines its History

India's considerable landmass and population mean that it will always be a significant participant in global discourse. The Indian peninsula, which narrows to the south and is surrounded on three sides by sea, has given it a rich maritime heritage and sustained engagement with South East Asia and the Gulf that continues to this day. Its continental neighbourhood, however, contains its biggest challenges, as India is hemmed in by China to its North and East and Pakistan to its North and West.

Adding to this challenge is the fact that while India's maritime neighbourhood eastward to the Indo-Pacific contains several key allies of the US, its continental neighbourhood does not. Finally, the geographical features that form the boundaries of South Asia - the Hindukush and Himalayas to the North and the Indian Ocean to the South - ensure that India cannot take decisions in isolation. Its sustained quest for a place at the global high table frequently faces headwinds or requires New Delhi to divert its attention due to crises in the neighbourhood.

As a result, the planners of Indian foreign policy have, since the beginning, valued strategic autonomy. This was India's choice - not, as some believe, merely because of the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) after the Bandung Conference in 1955, but even before India's independence, before the Cold War began, and before India's first post-independence wars with Pakistan and China.

In an address to the Constituent Assembly in 1946, then Interim Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru first referred to the tenets that would guide independent India's foreign policy. Broadly, India's pitch to the rest of the developing world was three-fold: an aversion to bloc politics (non-alignment), solidarity with countries battling colonial, imperialist and racist powers, and India's intention to speak up, and be the 'voice of the voiceless'.

"We propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another, which have led in the past to wars and which may again lead to disasters on an even vaster scale....It is for this '*One World*' that free India will work, a world in which there is the free cooperation of free peoples, and no class group exploits another," Mr. Nehru said in his speech broadcast over All India Radio in September 1946.

A decade later, the Non-Aligned Movement was born, based on the Bandung Conference's ten principles, which included respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, equality, non-interference, as well as an adherence to the United Nations Charter.

As a founding member and leader of the Movement, India had a strong role in formulating these tenets. Over the next few decades, India was at the forefront of building groupings of countries with a similar post-colonial outlook. The establishment of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) for developing nations in 1964, followed by the decision of Latin American countries to join African and Asian countries to create the Group of 77 (G-77 now includes 134 nations, but retains its original name) as well as the conception of the "Global South" and the need for "South-South Cooperation" were all expressions of India's independence, non-alignment and strategic autonomy in foreign policy.

From Idealism to Realpolitik

Since that era, the global Non-Aligned Movement may have lost its relevance, but Indian non-alignment has survived, precisely because it has continuously evolved and adapted, giving Indian foreign policy more flexibility when required. In 1991, after the twin shocks to the market and energy supplies from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War (the US invasion of Iraq) sent the Indian economy into a full spiral, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao took a number of steps that brought major changes to certain aspects of diplomacy - economic reforms, the 'Look East' policy, a renewed engagement with the US in a unipolar world, and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel, and others. These steps were essentially driven by the need to diversify defence suppliers, secure energy supply chains, and shore up the economy, and rather than abandoning non-alignment, represented an assertion of India's strategic autonomy.

"As classically formulated, Non-Alignment probably assumes a different significance from the one it had in the third quarter of our century," said Former Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao giving the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture in 1995 on 'Gandhi in the Global Village'. "But as a principle of equity and sanity, which enabled the developing nations to speak with a voice of dignity in the fora of the world, Non- Alignment is as relevant today as it was when it was enunciated ... .and pre-dated Indian independence," Rao added.

> **The Gujral-Vajpayee-Singh era that followed was consistent in following the foreign policy trends that Rao began - a growing closeness with the US, growing concerns over China's aggressive rise, a lower dependence on Russia, and attempts to keep improving ties in the neighbourhood and regional cooperation despite growing terror attacks backed by Pakistan.**

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee meets President of the US, George W Bush in New York on September 24, 2003. | White House/Paul Morse.

A Detour from Non-Alignment

A declaration of change, came however, in 2014. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear in the first few months of his tenure, that he would helm a more muscular, 'realpolitik' version of foreign policy, one that would engage more intensely with global powers as India would seek to be a "leading power". Addressing the US Congress in 2016, PM Modi said that the "hesitations of history" in the India-US relationship had been overcome.

Later that year, Modi became the first Indian PM to miss the NAM summit, being held in Venezuela, a country at loggerheads with the US. In 2017, India also decided to zero out its oil imports from Iran and Venezuela under pressure from the US, and the US-India-Australia-Japan Quad was resumed, giving the impression that India was moving closer towards an alliance-like relationship with the US. India's decision to sign three "Foundational Agreements" with the US on military cooperation - LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018) and BECA (2020) further added to this impression.

While distancing from non-alignment, PM Modi and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke now of the need for 'multi-alignment', or aligning to more than one power. More recently, however, New Delhi has reverted to a stance less focussed on alignment and more on autonomy, in a "multipolar world". PM Modi has skipped all NAM summits during his tenure, but has begun a new engagement pitching the "Voice of the Global South" and hosted a number of online summits, where most of the developing nations that attend are also members of the NAM, to discuss prevalent issues.

"Imagine if [India were] not today adopting strategic autonomy. Please tell me, which country in the world would you like to join up with and put our future in their hands?" External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar asked at a seminar recently. "I can't think of anybody. [India's] interest is best secured by maximising its options, maintaining its freedom of choices," he added.

Five Shocks between 2020 and 2025

This turnaround has been affected by five developments spurring geopolitical turmoil between 2020-2025, that have changed India's foreign policy considerations:

- **The Covid Pandemic** that wrecked India's health security, as well as its dependence on supply chains, as nations turned more protectionist.

- **China's transgressions at the Line of Actual Control**, Galwan clashes and the four-year military standoff that tested India's conflict resourcing priorities away from the maritime to its continental conflicts.

- **Russian invasion of Ukraine** that imperilled India's food, fuel and fertilizer security and brought in heavy sanctions. Already hampered by its decision to give up cheaper Iranian oil, New Delhi is now considering the cost of giving up heavily discounted Russian oil as well.

- **Israel's destruction of Gaza after the October 7 attacks** and the devastating impact of regional tensions on India's connectivity plans over India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), the India, Israel, the UAE and the United States (I2U2) grouping , use of Chabahar Port and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) running through the region.

- **Trump shock** - a number of steps taken by US President Donald Trump in his second term - including 50% tariffs and trade bullying, closer ties with Pakistan, and plans for a "G-2" with China. Above all, as India launched Operation Sindoor in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack, the US countered its narrative with claims of having mediated the ceasefire.

Conclusion

Each of these shocks has reinforced the message that India must continue to follow the original, albeit lonely, path that the founders of the Republic decided on. Foreign policy may be about geography and other immutable factors, but strategy in Indian foreign policy must expand its options without narrowing India's vision for its future. In a world where global powers are themselves breaking the rules-based order and testing India's security matrix and path towards prosperity for its people, strategic autonomy becomes less a choice than a necessity — almost a Hobson's choice.

Suhasini Haidar

Suhasini Haidar is the Diplomatic Editor of The Hindu newspaper and hosts a weekly online show "WorldView with Suhasini Haidar". Prior to this, Suhasini was Foreign Affairs editor and prime time anchor for India's leading 24-hr English news channel CNN-IBN (2005-2014) and correspondent for CNN International's New Delhi bureau. In 2015, she was the recipient of the most prestigious Indian print journalism 'Prem Bhatia' award. Over the course of her 28-year reporting career, Suhasini has covered the most challenging stories & conflicts from the most diverse regions including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Libya, Lebanon and Syria.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY- MYTH OR REALITY?

Shyam Saran

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with the US President, George Bush in New Delhi on March 2, 2006. | White House/ Paul Morse.

Origin of the Term 'Strategic Autonomy'

In July 2005, India and the US announced that they would negotiate a Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement that would enable India to gain access to the international civil nuclear energy market without having to limit, in any way, its nuclear deterrent. It is important to appreciate that this landmark development was taking place in the context of a growing strategic convergence between India and the US.

This convergence included a common interest in meeting the challenge posed by China's emergence as a front-ranking economic and military power. It was important for India to convey that this did not mean that it would align itself with the US on every issue. There would be issues on which the two countries could be partners, and there would be issues on which they would have different perspectives and adopt different postures.

At that time, for example, India was engaging constructively with the military regime in Myanmar, whereas US policy was to isolate and sanction the regime. The two countries also had differing views on the role of Pakistan and the situation in Afghanistan. In Nepal, India was promoting a political understanding between the country's mainstream political parties and the Maoists, while the US regarded the latter as a terrorist group. On matters relating to the subcontinent, India insisted on taking the lead.

> **It was in this context that the concept of "strategic autonomy" was introduced to convey that the proposed nuclear deal—a major**

departure in India–US relations—did not, in any way, limit India's foreign policy options. As India's Foreign Secretary from 2004 to 2006, I used this term for the first time while speaking to a US think tank delegation at the Observer Research Foundation, probably at the end of 2005 or the beginning of 2006.

I was asked whether I was conveying that India still adhered to the policy of non-alignment. I explained that, during a certain historical period, non-alignment was the instrument through which India pursued strategic autonomy. In the current historical period, India was aligned with several partners on issues of convergent interest, and therefore non-alignment could become a more limiting concept.

Strategic autonomy was the more fundamental and consistent underpinning of India's foreign policy since it emerged as an independent country in 1947. It is this underlying principle that explains the various foreign policy choices India has made in different periods and on different issues. Since its first articulation during my tenure as Foreign Secretary, the term has gradually become part of India's foreign policy lexicon.

In 2012, Harsh Pant of the Observer Research Foundation recognized this pedigree of the term:

"The term strategic autonomy was first formally articulated by the Indian foreign policy establishment during the tenure of Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran from 2004 to 2006. It became the guiding principle for the Indian side during the negotiations of the India–US Civil Nuclear Agreement and was used to describe India's independent decision-making capability despite strengthening ties with the US".[1]

This is exactly right.

Defining Strategic Autonomy

How should one define the term "strategic autonomy"? It is best understood as the capacity of a state to take relatively autonomous decisions on matters of vital interest to the state. The element of relativity is important. Not all interests are of a vital nature, and in a multi-state landscape, one cannot ascribe absolute value to every interest. If one did so, there would be no space for diplomacy. On different issues, in different time periods and situations, the calculus will differ.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President of China, Xi Jinping during Official Reception for Heads of States/ Heads of Governments at SCO Summit at Tianjin, in China on August 31, 2025. | PIB.

In the negotiations on the nuclear deal with the US, there were red lines India was not prepared to cross. It would not accept any limitation on its right to pursue the further development of its nuclear weapons arsenal or to cap its size. This was clearly a vital interest. However, India accepted the need to separate nuclear facilities that were exclusively related to the nuclear weapons domain from those that were entirely civilian in nature. Only the latter would benefit from international civil nuclear cooperation under India-specific international safeguards.

Strategic autonomy was best pursued through a policy of non-alignment during the Cold War and the East–West confrontation. Having won the extended struggle against colonial rule, a newly independent India was not willing to accept a new form of political subordination as a junior ally in a military alliance system headed by one or the other superpower. There has been a continuing popular consensus that never again should the destiny of the people of India be determined in a foreign capital.

With the end of the Cold War, the pursuit of strategic autonomy did not become invalid. The changed international geopolitical situation and the transformation of India into a more substantial economic and military power made a different articulation of strategic autonomy both possible and necessary. Non-alignment had elements of defensiveness because of the limitations of power faced by early independent India.

Today, the emergence of India as a front-ranking economic, technological, and military power has imparted greater confidence to its pursuit of strategic autonomy. India now has greater agency and the ability to play a larger role in shaping a new international order. India's foreign policy today may be described as independent, multi-aligned, or as working through issue-based coalitions.

Yet the guiding star remains the upholding of strategic autonomy. For example, both India and China have expressed a preference for a multipolar world order. However, India has gone further by insisting that a multipolar world order must include a multipolar Asia. In other words, India does not accept a hierarchical order in Asia dominated by China, in which it would be a junior player. This is a clear example of India's strategic autonomy principle. Strategic autonomy has imparted a remarkable consistency to India's foreign policy.

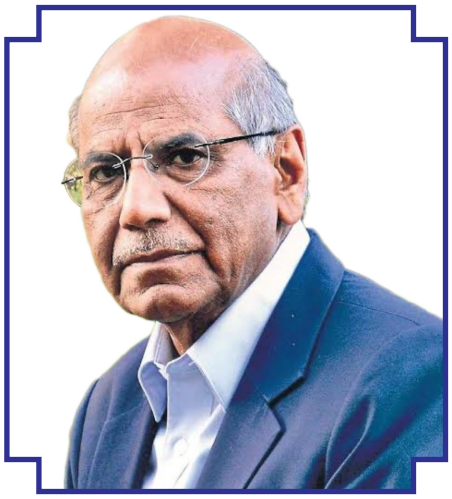
Conclusion

Every incoming government seeks to convey that it has brought major departures in foreign policy that distinguish it from its predecessors. While the articulation may change, the essence of strategic autonomy remains constant.

It draws inspiration from the country's civilizational identity, its geographical location, its history and culture, and, above all, the sensibilities of its people.

Endnotes

[1] Harsh Pant. 2012. *The Strategic Autonomy of India: Is it a Mirage*?. ORF–Global South.



Shyam Saran

Shyam Saran is a distinguished Indian career diplomat. He joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1970 and rose to become the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India from 2004 to 2006. Prior to his appointment as the Foreign Secretary, he served as India's ambassador to Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal and as its High Commissioner to Mauritius. Upon retiring as the Foreign Secretary, he was appointed the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Indo-US Civil Nuclear Issues and later as Special Envoy and Chief Negotiator on Climate Change. Until 2015, he was the Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board under the National Security Council Secretariat.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IS A DEFENSIVE TERMINOLOGY

Kanwal Sibal

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron in Marseille, France on February 12, 2025. | MEA.

Introduction

France and India adhere most vocally to the concept of strategic autonomy. The course and context of the attachment of the two countries to this concept are, however, entirely different. France is a member of a military alliance, while India abjures membership of any military alliance as a matter of policy. The challenges that the two countries face in asserting strategic autonomy are of a different order.

The Case of France

The concept of strategic autonomy has its origin in the 1990s in French military doctrine, though France has sought to chart a more autonomous course in international affairs much before that. France remains attached to this concept even though it became a member of the NATO alliance in 1949. On the face of it, membership of a military alliance seems incompatible with retaining strategic autonomy. The bedrock of a military alliance is subscribing to a shared strategic outlook and acceptance of core security and political obligations that flow from an alliance.

Some historical reasons explain why France is the most vocal proponent of strategic autonomy in Europe. Its roots are in its resistance to Anglo-Saxon domination of the West, a rivalry that has not entirely disappeared despite the many bonds that tie France to Anglo-Saxon powers. France, a historically great European and colonial power, was defeated and occupied by Germany in the Second World War. Freed by the Anglo-Saxon powers, its great power status suffered inevitable erosion.

France had to strive to obtain a Permanent Seat in the UN Security Council. It came under US pressure not to go nuclear, which is why it considered the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) discriminatory and signed it only in August 1992. The declaration by President De Gaulle that the French nuclear deterrent was directed at all points of the compass (which meant friends and foes alike) was a show of strategic autonomy. France is a founding member of NATO but withdrew from its integrated military structure in 1966 to exclude itself from NATO's military planning as an assertion of its strategic autonomy, but rejoined it in 2009 to mend fences with the US after it strongly opposed the 2003 US war on Iraq because of which serious tensions arose in US-France relations.

Nevertheless, France has continued to believe in strategic autonomy, but this concept is seen as a specific French ambition which has not been shared by other European countries all these years because they see this notion as undermining the NATO alliance and weakening the US security umbrella for Europe. France, as a nuclear power and a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council - the only one in the European Union after Brexit - can nurture strategic ambitions of its own but the other EU countries which host US bases, buy US arms and rely on the US for their security have been against making European security hostage to French great power ambitions.

Europe's Turn to Strategic Autonomy

European thinking on strategic autonomy has begun to change after Donald Trump began questioning the rationale of NATO's existence during his first term and, in his second term has pressed Europe to take more responsibility for its own defence, reduce the financial burden on the US for defending Europe, increase the defence budget of European countries to 5 % of GDP and buy more American arms. The Europeans have felt strategically humiliated that Trump has gone over their head to deal directly with President Putin to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. The transatlantic alliance has been rocked.

The EU has now begun talking about Europe developing the capacity to take independent decisions in its own interest, reduce its dependence on the US for its security, and have a rearmament plan for Europe so that Europe can act alone if needed to protect its vital interests. It is argued that this ambition is not necessarily to dispense with NATO but supplement it with Europe's own, independent military muscle. In other words. Europe should be able to exercise strategic autonomy. Europe's moves to support Ukraine financially and with supply of arms to enable it to continue resisting Russia and manifestly seeking to throw a spanner in Trump's peace plans that exclude Europe from the discussions with

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets the President of the US, Donald Trump and the First Lady of the US, Melania Trump at Motera Stadium in Ahmedabad on February 24, 2020. | MEA.

Russia are intended to carve out a degree of strategic autonomy for itself.

India's Evolution

India's concept of strategic autonomy has different roots. It exercised its strategic autonomy right from the time of gaining independence by not joining any military bloc when there was pressure to do so by the US, and refusing to take sides in the Cold War which caused tensions in its relations with the West. India chose nonalignment as a national strategy in the belief that this best protected its national interests. India negotiated the NPT but refused to accede to it because it was discriminatory. India did not want to foreclose its strategic options permanently within an invidious nuclear order. Early on, it began to lay the foundations for capacities in the nuclear, missile and space domains that would give it the means to exercise "strategic autonomy" in due course.

With the Nonaligned Movement having lost relevance, India has redefined the characterisation of its foreign policy in different ways - as multi-alignment or preserving strategic autonomy.

> **India's approach in a post Cold War international order or a reshaped one that was based on globalisation for a few decades, and now in the throes of anti-globalisation trends, is to engage with all countries and align itself on specific issues with like-minded countries. It is to join diverse plurilateral groupings that serve our interests, expand our options and help us to hedge against pressures from any quarter, such as BRICS, SCO or the Quad.**

We have greatly strengthened our ties with the US, which did the most damage to us strategically until the nuclear deal, and, at the same time, we have preserved our ties with Russia, which has given us strategic support on vital issues since the late 1950s. We have entered into strategic partnerships with a host of countries, which is also reflective of our "strategic autonomy', in that there is no exclusivity in our foreign relations. We have sought to widen the support base of our strategic economy by becoming a voice of the Global South. In fact, we played a major role in putting the interests and priorities of the Global South on the agenda of the G 20.

Limits to Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy does not mean that there are no constraints on the countries in making foreign policy choices, or that the exercise of strategic autonomy is unfettered. In a larger sense, the UN Charter, international law, the obligations imposed by military alliances, the need to adhere to negotiated international agreements on issues of general concern to the international community, membership of trading blocs, all limit the exercise of strategic autonomy, if that term is interpreted to mean that a country is not obliged to make compromises on its capacity to take independent decisions on all issues of strategic importance.

It is for this reason that one can argue that the scope of any country's strategic autonomy is determined by the military, economic and political power that it wields in the international system. In other words, the more powerful a country, the more strategic autonomy it can exercise. The US has always enjoyed the highest degree of strategic autonomy, though during the Cold War it had to take into account the countervailing power of the Soviet Union. After the latter's collapse, the phase of US unilateralism began, with NATO expansion and regime changes. It is US power that still explains how Trump has been able to de-stabilise the existing global order that the US itself largely created because it is seen as no longer serving its strategic interests. Despite all this, the US cannot take the level of confrontation with powerful adversaries to a point where it can risk a war with them. Its map re-making days are essentially over.

The phenomenal economic rise of China in the last three decades has increased its capacity to exercise strategic autonomy. Along with its growing military strength, it now controls

strategically critical technologies and raw materials. But it has still to contend with US military alliances in the region and renewed pressures on it in geographies that the US considers strategically sensitive. Russia, with its military power, nuclear weapons and natural resources also enjoys a degree of strategic autonomy, but it is circumscribed by US power.

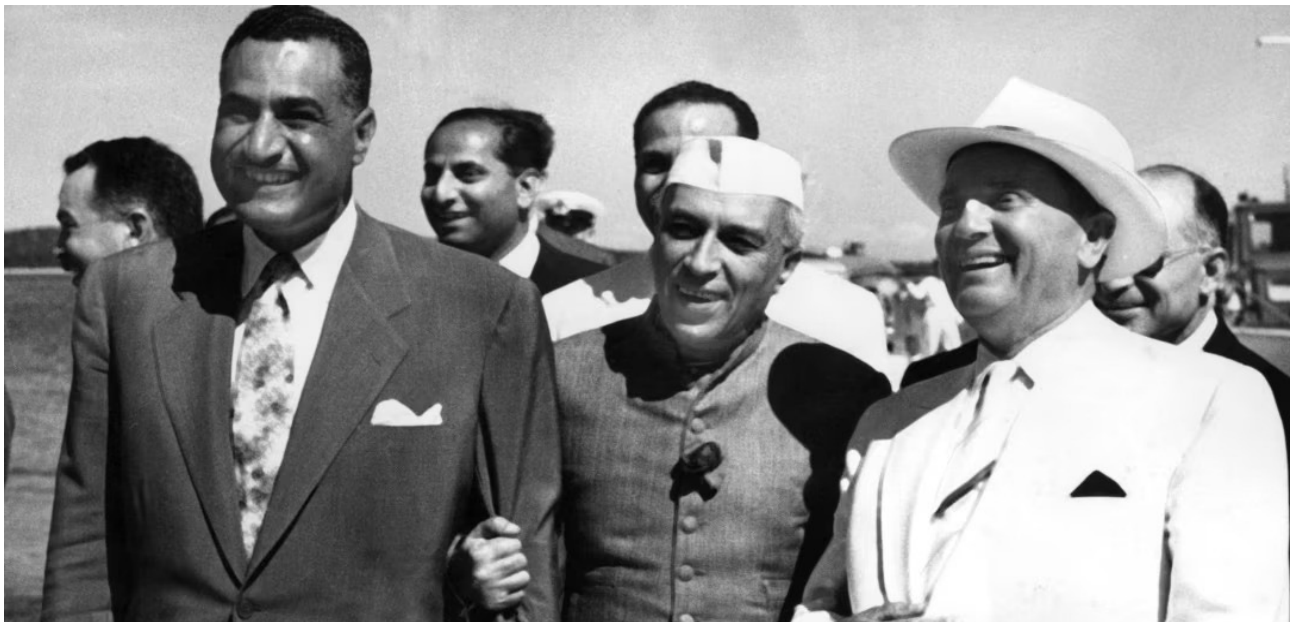
It is interesting that it is essentially countries like India and France that define their foreign policy in terms of maintaining strategic autonomy. The other powerful countries such as the US, Russia and China do not feel the need to describe the orientation of their relations with the rest of the world in these terms. What this suggests is that "strategic autonomy" has connotations of a defensive terminology: the need to show muscle and assert resistance to external pressure.

Kanwal Sibal

Kanwal Sibal, a distinguished career diplomat with 41 years of experience in diplomacy, is a former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. He has been Ambassador to Turkey, Egypt, France and Russia, and Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington DC (with personal rank of Ambassador). He was a member of India's National Security Advisory Board from 2008 to 2010 and is on the Executive Council of the Vivekananda International Foundation. He is also an Adviser to the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum. In 2017, The Government of India awarded him the Padma Shri award for his distinguished services in the field of Public Affairs.

IN SEARCH OF A RUBRIC FOR INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Krishnan Srinivasan



Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (centre), Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito (right) and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (left) meeting in 1956. The three leaders are considered to be among the founding fathers of the Non-Alignment Movement. | AFP/rferl.org.

The Challenge of Defining India's Foreign Policy

The difficulty in defining Indian foreign policy is not a new one. Since independence both insiders and outsiders have indulged in word games on the subject. The ideological moorings of non-alignment began, existed and died with the idealism of Jawaharlal Nehru, followed by the realism and pragmatism that continues in various forms to this day. This could be described as "improvisational opportunism", in the sense of adjusting and seeking opportunities in a constantly changing geopolitical landscape, in which India seeks recognition as an emerging power together with a sense of exceptionalism based on Hindu dharma or righteous conduct, Buddha's Middle Way and Golden Mean, and Gandhi's non-violence.

Neutrality was foreshadowed by Nehru from 1938 onwards, and articulated as non-alignment in 1950,[1] its essence being that sovereignty enshrined the right to take decisions that were not subject to any outside pressure or

authority. Yet, being a non-ideological person, Nehru's instructions in 1948 to Indian delegates at international fora were to put India's interests first even before the merits of the case.[2] This was essentially *realpolitik*, which continues to this day irrespective of manifold definitions.

Meanwhile, under Nehru, the country gained kudos as the leader of the newly decolonized countries after successful Indian diplomatic initiatives in the Korean War (1953), the Geneva Indo-China Conference (1954), the Suez conflict (1956) and Congo peacekeeping (1960). Yugoslavia and Egypt were non-aligned through defiance of great powers, but India was not confrontationist and did not feel the need to seek foreign assistance to protect its sovereignty. Relations with the US led West continued but were lukewarm and subject to periodic downturns approaching hostility.

Non-alignment

Non-alignment as a description of policy in international relations was unusual; it implied agnosticism and was easier to define in negatives – not idealistic, not exclusive, not ideological, not passive, not impartial, not indifferent. The Janata government (1977-79) also failed to produce any definition of its newly minted policy of 'genuine' non-alignment. Rajiv Gandhi used the term 'nonalignment' without a hyphen to mitigate its inherent negativity,[3] but was unable to override the rules of grammar. Senior diplomat T N Kaul claimed non-alignment was not a policy but a posture or attitude,[4] and his colleague R Jaipal bizarrely concluded that to be non-aligned was to be "no more virtuous or meritorious than to be aligned."[5]

The Non-Aligned Movement with periodic summits became a vehicle for anti-West, anti-US sloganeering and should logically have been terminated after the demise of the Soviet Union; because non-alignment necessarily presupposes the existence of two or more opposing camps, it was self-evidently considered passé after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but no country wished to apply the *coup de grâce*. Inertia, however, is commonplace in international relations. For example, the long moribund League of Nations was only finally terminated in 1946 after the Second World War.

By then shorn of India's ideological post-colonial moorings, the quest for innovative definitions of its foreign policy began even as the new international groupings of the 'unipolar' world after 1990 took pains to portray themselves as not anti-American. From 1990

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (4th from left with a hat and tie) in Moscow on June 8, 1976. The two countries signed a Friendship Treaty under their leadership in 1971. | AP/Boris Yurchenko/fox59.com.

to 2014 under Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, India's foreign policy was directed towards economic growth, strategic partnerships, and global integration, highlighted by the US-India nuclear agreement in 2008.

Other actions included introducing a "Look East Policy" to boost ties with Southeast Asia, deepening relations with Russia and Japan, and efforts to secure backing for a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council. The Indian approach was rooted in the belief that domestic economic development and global diplomatic engagement were interconnected.

The Post 2014 Phase

In 2014, with the election victory of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it became rapidly clear that the received wisdom and inherited lexicon from the Nehru/Congress period was no longer to be regarded as applicable or relevant. Alternative terminology had to be devised in presenting to the Indian public the current government's projection that there was a new and more robust dynamic in Indian foreign policy.

Hence, the public was variously introduced to strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and multi-polarity, which could mean everything to everyone, especially since India has over 30 so-called 'strategic partnerships' with foreign entities, rendering the term bereft of significance - as former European Council President Herman van Rompuy stated significantly, "until now we had strategic partners; now we also need a strategy."[6] As for the term "multi", any foreign policy, even for very small nations, can inevitably mean dealing with multiple partners.

> **It seems self-evident that the current Government is still in search of the right form of words in which to package its foreign policy to the Indian populace. Its task has been made more complicated by the uneven tenor of India-US relations with the second Trump Administration, during which the White House seems to lurch between the extremes of declared affection and disparagement for the Indian government.**

As New Delhi navigates these new challenges caused by Washington, on which so many of India's aspirations seem to depend, Sanjaya Baru has explained[7] that Foreign Minister S Jaishankar has clarified "that India's policy of multi-alignment would require her to 'engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbors in, extend the neighborhood and expand traditional constituencies of support."

It would be fair to say that today, with thanks to Donald Trump, India is now required to in fact 'manage' America and 'engage' China, while continuing to 'reassure' Russia. A quarter century ago, 'engaging' America was viewed by New Delhi as also a means to 'manage' China. Today, engaging China appears to have become a means to manage America. This situation requires new thinking in New Delhi because it places a few new cards in Beijing's hands. The Modi government has so far adapted well to the new global strategic environment, refusing to kowtow to Trump but demonstrating enormous patience in 'managing' him. Any return to 'engagement' will depend on the success of the efforts to 'manage'.

This reasoning, however, appears to prioritize India's relations with the US and diminish our ties with other influential partners in our search for multi-alignment. Whether this is a wise approach with a super-power that has let India down more frequently in its 80-year existence than any other foreign partner will be tested by time.

Meanwhile, India sees virtue in running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, best viewed by the renewal, on the margins of an international gathering skipped by the Prime Minister, of a 10-year US-India Framework Defense Agreement, which according to Manoj Joshi, reiterates "a pact first signed in 2005 and extended in 2015, neither of which produced outcomes of lasting significance. (It) has

pledged transformative co-development and technology transfer but delivered little beyond rhetoric.... [risking] becoming another buyer-seller agreement that has netted the US over $22 billion in material sales to India over the past two decades."[8]

Conclusion

In regard to definitions therefore, we circle back to conclude as we began. As the Modi government wrestles with the economic and political challenges presented by the American and Chinese governments, it will continue to search for the apposite phrase to apply to its evolving foreign policy. "Non-alignment" will clearly not suffice and "neutrality" is too passive. It should be noted that Nehru rarely used these terms, preferring 'independent foreign policy'[9] – which remains to this day the best description of the theory and practice of Indian foreign policy.

Endnotes

[1] Krishnan Srinivasan. 2012. *Diplomatic Channels*. p 67.
[2] Ibid, p 69.
[3] Ibid, p 126.
[4] TN Kaul. 1988. *Ambassadors Need Not Lie*. p. 49.
[5] R. Jaipal. 1983. *Non-alignment*. p 3.
[6] Krishnan Srinivasan. 2015. *Europe in Emerging Asia*. p 28. Also B. von Muenchow-Pohl. 2012. *India and Europe*. Carnegie Papers. p 15.
[7] Sanjaya Baru. 2025. *Trump has announced G2 – with China. What should India do*. Indian Express, 4 November.
[8] Manoj Joshi. 2025. *Another India-US Defence Agreement, Same Old Obstacles*. The Wire, 3 November.
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Krishnan Srinivasan

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Indian Foreign Secretary and Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. He has been a fellow at Cambridge, Leiden, and Uppsala. Mr Srinivasan dons many hats and has written nine books on world politics and five detective novels. His observations on the status and values of the Commonwealth of Nations in The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth (2005) provoked debate about the organization's future direction. He is a regular columnist and book reviewer and his articles appear in leading newspapers and periodicals. He has contributed to the Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy, Seminar, and the Round Table.

The Geopolitics

INDIA'S FREEDOM TO ENGAGE: REDEFINING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Syed Akbaruddin

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing 'The Summit of the Future' on September 23, 2024 in New York. | UN Photo/Loey Felipe.

Introduction

The global order is transforming at a pace faster than the norms that govern it. Economic interdependence, once promoted as a cooperative endeavour, is now weaponised. Trade is filtered through tariffs and subsidies. The spread of technological innovation is controlled by export restrictions. Geography, once about boundaries, is now also about transboundary routes, energy corridors, and satellite constellations. Some even see today's great-power competition as a prelude to a great-power concert. India's response to this volatile environment is to re-imagine strategic autonomy from a moral posture to an operating method.

The strategy is not about fence-sitting. It is a deliberate method to navigate contested arenas. It is not about keeping its distance from the world, but about the freedom to shape engagements on India's own terms through sovereign choices. It is about being present on multiple platforms, building partnerships across divides, shaping outcomes without getting boxed in, and retaining the flexibility to shift course.

From Non-Alignment to Networked Power

India's strategic autonomy can be traced back to its non-aligned identity. During the Cold War there was space between rival blocs for an independent foreign policy, until the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty signalled that autonomy needed to be backed by strength. Subsequently, though marked by slow growth, the drive was towards self-reliance in food and nuclear security.

The economic liberalisation of 1991 translated opportunity into capability. As India integrated with the global economy, its choices expanded. After the 1998 nuclear tests it opted for engagement rather than isolation, and the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement with the United States underlined its capacity to negotiate for its sovereignty, not just assert it.

Three phases capture this arc: freedom from control protected sovereignty in the early decades; freedom to integrate after 1991 built capability; and today, freedom to engage enables presence with choice.

Today, India partners the United States on maritime awareness and semiconductors, with France on the co-development of weapons systems, with Russia on energy and defence requirements, and with Africa, ASEAN, and Latin America on digital public goods. Engagements are not endorsements. They reflect agency that allows collaboration without constraint.

As a guiding principle, no single external partner should dominate any critical domain. In a volatile global environment, dependencies can be weaponised. Such situations require prompt review and rebalancing. While exceptions may arise, they must remain limited, temporary, and clearly justified.

Autonomy in a Fragmented World

Since 2020, there have been pandemics, sanctions and supply shocks which have hardened interdependence. The United States and China are decoupling in critical technologies. Europe is enhancing its defence spending, responding to events in Ukraine. The Global South has a more vocal tone but its leverage remains limited. India's response is disciplined diversification.

India has enhanced technology cooperation with the United States through iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology), now renamed the TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) initiative. US firms are committing multi-billion-dollar investments in semiconductor assembly, testing and design in India, alongside programmes to train tens of thousands of Indian engineers.

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar meets French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on June 12, 2025. | @ DrSJaishankar/X.

All this while India and Russia have retained their defence ties and increased energy cooperation. Following the war in Ukraine, discounted Russian crude at one stage accounted for close to two-fifths of India's oil imports, before gradually tapering as sanctions, tariffs and restrictions on Russian-origin products tightened.

India is also active in BRICS and the SCO, retaining multilateral flexibility. India's presidency of the G20 saw it champion a pragmatic agenda regarding digital infrastructure for development. It helped mainstream digital public goods through its toolkit for low-cost, interoperable rails. This has led to the gradual transboundary growth of UPI. As of late 2025, UPI is live for merchant payments or person to person transactions in at least nine countries, enabling Indians to have usable payment rails abroad.

Taken together, these actions exemplify not just India's adaptability, but an evolving strategy, which is neither isolationist nor aligned. The emphasis is on engaging widely, depending narrowly and constantly rebalancing to secure long-term autonomy.

Strategic Value and Trade-Offs

The pursuit of multiple partnerships and fewer hard dependencies gives India room to manoeuvre. However, it also results in pressures, making it vital to weigh what this freedom to engage delivers in practice and what it demands in return.

Mainstreaming sectors such as energy, technology, and finance has enhanced market resilience and helped protect households and businesses from unexpected shocks. Access to world-class know-how has improved jobs, infrastructure, and service standards at home. Participation in global fora and support for development finance have extended India's reach in the Global South. The most significant advantage of this approach lies in option value — the ability to say yes or no with credibility, improving outcomes on price, access, and intellectual property. In uncertain times, having options turns surprises into manageable costs rather than strategic crises.

The costs are real, yet manageable. Hedging can be interpreted as ambivalence and may reduce leverage in partnerships. Lack of alignment with blocs can dilute India's role when rules are shaped. A wide web of partnerships slows decisions, as more factors must be weighed in crises. Diversification raises costs and complicates interoperability. Great powers, such as the US and China, test the resolve of those outside their camps through tariffs, sanctions and access restrictions. These pressures are containable when anchored in clear, issue-defined red lines — no compromise on territorial integrity, no external veto over core economic and digital choices, and no participation in coercive arrangements that undermine the Global South. With such guardrails, and playbooks for emergencies and constant presence on global platforms, the benefits of autonomy can remain extensive while costs are kept in check.

Autonomy Tests Lie Ahead

Today, much is at stake in the security landscape. In the context of emerging challenges, the realms of borders and maritime pathways, climate and health, cyber and satellite communications, and financial markets and payment systems all interact and shape what is possible under the rubric of strategic autonomy.

In the defence sector, the aim is credible deterrence without formal alliances, built on better awareness, quicker reach and steady readiness along India's land boundaries and coastline. Along land borders, it means managing simultaneous pressures without getting drawn into others' rivalries. At sea, it means being indispensable to the security of the Indian Ocean.

In energy and resource transition, security now includes lithium, cobalt, nickel and phosphates in addition to oil and gas. It also addresses the resilience of critical infrastructure and public health. The objective is to ensure supplies of fuels, critical minerals and key health and food inputs, with ports, pipelines and flexible networks to support industry and domestic sectors during shocks.

Autonomy, in cyberspace and space, includes secure computing, hardened infrastructure, resistance to cyber and disinformation threats,

and assured connectivity to space-based resources. The same satellites used for routine transactions are now at risk, making their protection imperative, along with protecting national borders.

Freedom in economic matters will also depend on what India's balance sheet looks like vis-à-vis the world. Who owes it money? In what currencies are its contracts denominated? How vulnerable are Indian companies to secondary sanctions? How robust are Indian payment systems? These will shape the scope of India's freedom of choice. A diversified trade basket without diversified financial partners is a partial hedge, at best.

Strategic autonomy, however, cannot be limited merely to external balancing. It is underpinned by a cohesive internal social order. It involves competent law-enforcement institutions that can tackle transboundary challenges, including international terrorism, cybercrime and organised crime, and ensure that state legitimacy is not undermined.

From Options to Outcomes

The success of any strategy is judged by outcomes, not claims. A simple scoreboard can show real progress.

Three shifts, from the factory floor to foreign policy, will decide whether option value becomes lasting capability. The first is productive power, which means designing and producing more of what India uses, with each foreign deal judged by what it adds to skills, scale and intellectual property. Second is technological agency, built on dependable compute and a say in standards, so that digital cooperation becomes a source of diplomatic capital. The third is narrative clarity, which ensures that partners know what India will do, why, and by when, thereby turning ambiguity into legitimacy. Together, these shifts turn episodic choices into predictable delivery.

> **In a world of tough choices, true power lies in having options and using them effectively. Once, sovereignty was ensured by freedom from control by others. Subsequently, sovereignty was ensured by freedom to build and integrate capacity. Now, sovereignty is ensured by the freedom to engage and shape external outcomes. Autonomy is not a doctrine. It is a discipline.**

India's strength will be measured not only by the tanks deployed on its borders, but also by the chips in its data centres; by the strength of its coffers; by its reach in cyberspace and outer space; and by the credibility of its choices. When India can say yes or no on its own terms, back those words with capability, and match them with delivery, that is strategic autonomy.

Syed Akbaruddin

Syed Akbaruddin is currently the founding Dean of the Kautilya School of Public Policy in Hyderabad. He has had a distinguished diplomatic career spanning more than three decades which culminated upon the completion of his tenure as the Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations. Prior to that, he was the official spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs from 2012 to 2015 and served in various Indian Missions abroad. He also has the distinction of working as an international civil servant at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. He writes and speaks extensively on global issues.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY & MULTIPOLARITY: FAULT LINES IN THE EMERGING SECURITY FRAMEWORK

M K Narayanan

Russian President Vladimir Putin (left), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Tianjin on September 1, 2025. Photo: AP/PTI

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that global governance is under severe strain at present. Geopolitical and technological disruption, apart from climate risks, pandemics and widening inequalities, are among several causes for this. How this will shape future developments is uncertain as of now, but that it certainly would, is without a shadow of doubt.

As 2026 beckons, a look at the world would confirm the premise that seldom has there been a period of greater flux in the global, specially the global security environment. The list of conflicts and tensions across the globe well confirms this hypothesis. 2026 could well-nigh set a new record for deaths in wars. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Hamas war, have not abated and are continuing.

Lurking in the background are both ongoing and potential conflicts on the Horn of Africa, in Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, Myanmar, Thailand-Cambodia, China-Taiwan and more. Consequently, the world may well need to look beyond the immediate present, to try and determine what shape the future will take. Concepts such as multipolarity and strategic autonomy are both set to play a distinct role in this regard.

The present period marks a profound transformation from the immediate post-1945 world, which had given rise to what was often described as a 'liberal unipolar movement', presided over by the US. In the eight decades since, this unipolar world has had to give way to a more complex, competitive and fluid multi-polar environment. Concepts such as strategic autonomy – the ability to make policy decisions independent of undue external influence – and multipolarity, have since gained in popularity and significance in this fluid situation.

Strategic Autonomy & Multipolarity

Strategic autonomy and multipolarity are very dissimilar, though they may contain certain common attributes, and accommodate some of the same ideas. Strategic autonomy is rooted in the principles of the original Non-Aligned Movement, and reflects a neo-modern pragmatic doctrine for navigating a multi-polar world. On the other hand, multipolarity lacks similar ideological clarity. While both strategic autonomy and multipolarity derive their roots from common civilizational beliefs and concepts, there are fundamental differences between the two. These are not merely differences of degree, but are more fundamental.

Strategic autonomy is a vibrant concept guiding policy, and anchoring decisions in ways better suited to a differentiated world such as the one that exists today. Multipolarity lacks ideological coherence, and is subject to changes in extant situations. It is, hence, quite unlike strategic autonomy. Multipolarity could in some senses appear akin to 'tilting at the windmills', when it comes to changes and shifts in the international arena.

The inherent weakness of a concept such as strategic autonomy is becoming increasingly evident today. Few countries practice strategic autonomy, viz., independently formulating and executing policies in alignment with their national interests per se. While it remains a prime objective, most nations find it difficult to avoid falling back on easier options such as multipolarity. This is specifically true of areas and concepts such as security and defence; technology and digital systems; foreign policy; and energy and critical supply chains. Geopolitical uncertainties greatly aggravate this situation.

Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh felicitated by the King of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, in Riyadh on February 28, 2010. | Wikimedia Commons.

Currently, the most striking aspect of world affairs is the absence of a unified ideological framework, such as the one that previously existed under the label of a 'Liberal World Order', rebranded thereafter as the 'Rules Based Liberal Order'. The US played a leading role in this framework, and most of the rules were written and shaped by the West. Survival within the 'Rules Based Liberal Order', however, depended on acceptance of US hegemony in world affairs. As US hegemony weakened, and other powers emerged, the nature of the liberal world order underwent certain fundamental changes.

This has become even more apparent with the US of late pursuing a highly personalized bilateral and transactional foreign policy – in effect abandoning the unified ideological framework it had relied on for decades. Alongside this, and following the end of so called US hegemony in global affairs, several other countries, notably China and Russia emerged in a leadership role.

China's rise, in particular, its rapid economic growth, military modernization, technological developments in AI and Cyber, and some of its global initiatives has elevated it to a near-peer status with the US, Russia, despite its economic constraints, has lately reasserted its influence through its military capabilities and energy diplomacy, and notwithstanding the long drawn Ukraine conflict, is a power to be reckoned with, at least in the regional context.

The decline of Europe, and of countries like the UK have, meantime, become evident signs of declining Western hegemony and influence. The rise of middle powers such as Turkey and India have accentuated this process of decline in Western hegemony. Technological diffusion, newer digital technologies, cyber capabilities and AI tools have also reduced barriers of entry for power projection by many more powers across the world.

India and China represent two different poles in this respect. India emphasizes a wider dispersion, preferring strategic autonomy in this respect to multipolarity, to help manage and assist in its choices. China follows what could be termed as the pursuit of comprehensive national power, independent from Western controlled systems. Middle level countries are currently seeking to exploit one or other framework, thus providing greater scope for multipolarity in contradistinction to strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

To conclude, we are living in a hybrid world where a pluralistic global landscape is emerging, or has emerged, and coexists with older institutions. Neither, however, has the ability to impose their diktat on the other. With erstwhile global institutions declining in influence and capabilities, a global reordering is in the works. China is today an active actor and a provider of global public goods, benefiting from the decline of the US.

Other players, including some new regional actors, have emerged, but their ability to shape a more stable and cooperative global order is uncertain. Strategic autonomy and multipolarity are terms which are constantly being employed to denote policy choices; what is, however, evident is that while countries across the world are seeking new pathways of cooperation, global institutions continue to decline, and a global reordering has become essential.

In their effort to shape a more stable and cooperative world order, nations must, hence, explore more choices and demonstrate better

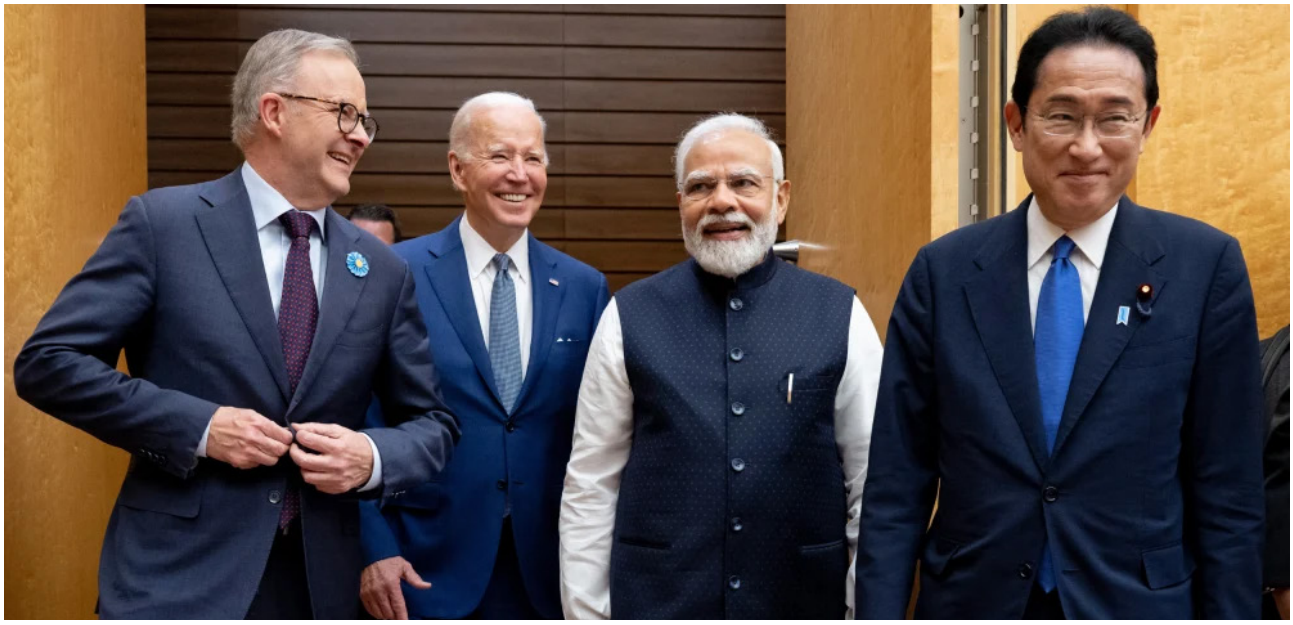
flexibility. This is still work in progress. Terms such as strategic autonomy and multipolarity used to explain or justify choices, cannot cloak the fact that the world today is far more uncertain and unsure than at any time since the end of the Cold War in the mid-20th Century.

M K Narayanan

M K Narayanan is a retired Indian Police Service (IPS) officer who held significant roles in India's government, including National Security Adviser from 2005 to 2010 and Governor of West Bengal from 2010 to 2014. He played a significant role in the negotiation of the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement. Much of his career was spent in intelligence with the Intelligence Bureau, which he led from 1987 to 1990 and again in 1991 dealing with a whole range of issues concerning internal and external security of India. His contribution was recognized with the Padma Shri, India's fourth highest civilian honour in 1992.

POWER SHIFTS, ALLIANCES, AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Sanjay Pulipaka



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with other Quad leaders at their summit in Claymont, Delaware, US on September 21, 2024. | Hindustan Times.

Introduction

In international politics, strategic autonomy refers to the capacity to act independently. In an interdependent world with integrated supply chains, the ability to act independently is never absolute. Sovereign states aiming for strategic autonomy work to strengthen domestic capabilities and to balance competing forces, thereby creating relatively more space for independent action. A sovereign state pursuing strategic autonomy will evaluate a specific policy or action to determine whether it will enhance or constrain its ability to act independently in the international domain.

Strategic autonomy is a consequence of a country's location in the hierarchy of power relations in international politics. Big powers are aware that they have the capabilities to act autonomously. Consequently, they are not overly concerned about maintaining their autonomy; instead, they define their external engagement in terms of establishing and maintaining spheres of influence.

On the other hand, it is the middle and rising powers (if not all, at least some) that define their international engagement in terms of strategic autonomy. Some rising powers believe they will emerge as big powers in the future and fend off pressure to align with the interests

of the big powers by actively diversifying their relationships.

Therefore, strategic autonomy is not an insular approach to international politics. Rather, countries pursuing strategic autonomy seek to cultivate diverse relationships. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted, India's policy has shifted from "maintaining equal distance from all nations, ..[to] ..the current approach.. [of].. being equally close to all—an "Equi-Closeness" policy."[1] However, the policy of equi-proximity does not automatically translate into developing alliance relationships.

India's 'No' to Alliances

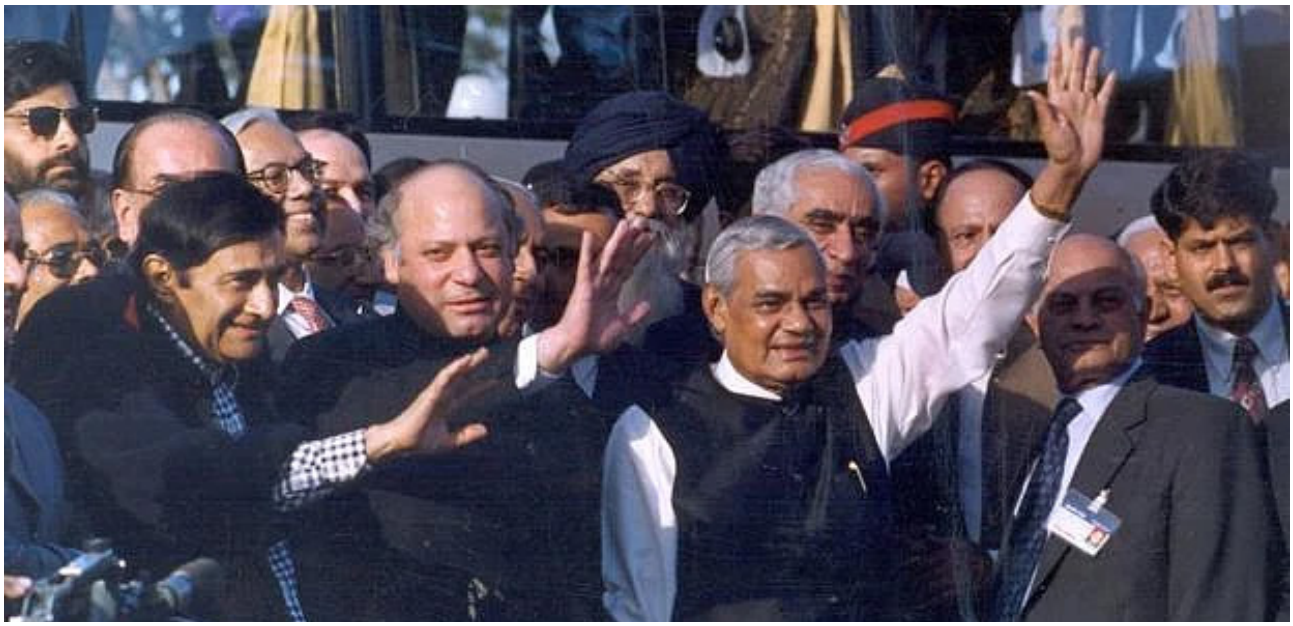
Countries such as India perceive that an alliance relationship constrains their choices. There are instances when countries within an alliance framework, such as France, have stressed the importance of acting independently in the international domain. Interestingly, the European Union, despite its alliance relationship with the United States, has also, in recent years, stressed the importance of adopting an approach of strategic autonomy.

There have been arguments that India should align with the United States to emerge as a major power. However, such exhortations overlook important challenges that hinder alliance formation between India and the United States.

An alliance is said to be in play if two or more countries form a group with a pledge that they would come to each other's rescue to fend off aggression by another country/countries outside the group. A primary prerequisite of an alliance is that the member countries recognise each other's territorial boundaries. A failure to recognise each other's territorial boundaries makes it difficult to determine if a member country is being subjected to aggression.

Interestingly, none of the Quad countries recognise India's territorial boundaries as cartographically defined by Delhi. For instance, the US has thus far refrained from stating that China and Pakistan are in illegal occupation of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir. Since the Quad countries do not recognise India's territorial boundaries as defined by Delhi, the prospect of the framework evolving into an alliance is very remote.

A similar dynamic is also evident in the case of BRICS countries. With China persistently engaging in grey-zone territorial violations against India, the prospect of BRICS evolving into an alliance is also unlikely. India cannot get into an alliance with any of the major powers, as they do not recognise India's territorial integrity with reference to Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Thus, India's strategic autonomy is also a consequence of how the world treats India.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in Lahore in 1999. | National Herald.

Some have hinted that Pakistan, while being an ally of the United States, was able to engage with China, and India could perhaps also maintain diverse relationships while being an ally of the United States. All major powers understand that Pakistan's strategic objectives are directed toward India, and that it neither seeks to emerge as a major power in Asia nor dreams of having a globally competitive economy.

Pakistan's strategic choices have an impact only on the Indian subcontinent and do not have a continental or global impact. On the other hand, India is the fourth-largest economy and seeks to play a leading role in international politics, and its strategic choices will elicit a robust response from global powers, which India needs to factor in.

Impact of History and Economic Interaction

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is also shaped by history and economic interactions. During much of the Cold War, the West, particularly the US, provided Pakistan with advanced military equipment. The end of the Cold War did not bring about dramatic changes in US policy towards India. India, because of its nuclear programme, was subjected to US sanctions, which were lifted only after the India-US nuclear deal was operationalised in 2008. Consequently, over the decades, India military procurement was tilted in favour of Russia. It is indeed true that the India- US defence partnership has advanced significantly in recent years.

However, it is still uncertain if the US, like Russia, would provide India with advanced strategic weapons, such as nuclear-powered submarines, without any strings attached. In the economic realm, the United States is India's largest trade partner. Among India's top ten trading countries, the United States (with a GDP of US $29 trillion in 2024) is the only economy with which India has a trade surplus. The Russian economy, with a GDP of US $2 trillion, does not constitute a significant export market for India.

China is also India's leading trading partner. However, India has a massive trade deficit with China. Because of domestic industrial overcapacity, China has emerged as a major exporting nation; therefore, it is highly unlikely that Indian exports will find space in China in the near future. Consequently, India will be more dependent on the US, the European Union, Southeast Asia and other emerging markets. To sum up, while India enjoys a robust defence relationship with Russia, in the economic realm, its future is tied to Europe and the US market. Given such dichotomies, it will always be difficult for India to have an alliance relationship with any of the major powers.

Post-Alliance Phase

Furthermore, the trend towards multipolarity in international politics is increasing, and power is getting increasingly diffused, which is impacting the foreign policies of sovereign states. It is perhaps important to recognise that international politics has entered a post-alliance phase for the following reasons:

- First, the transatlantic alliance and the US hub-and-spoke alliance in the Pacific are experiencing significant strain. The US leadership has called on its European allies to take ownership[2] of security on the Continent, and President Trump has suggested a G2 partnership[3] with China. These policy statements have raised concerns about whether the US will abandon its allies in the event of a conflict. More importantly, it appears that US leadership has conceded to China's version of spheres of influence (*New Type of Great Power Relations*).

- Second, European leadership, despite their deep anxiety about Russian intentions, has only extended material support to Ukraine and has refrained from putting boots on the ground.[4] Such reluctance stems from concerns about

escalation of war and fear of body bags returning home, with the consequent political backlash.

- Third, many Western societies today are deeply polarised, with competing political groupings suspecting and accusing each other of undermining national interest. These developments suggest that Western democracies today lack the appetite to meet classical alliance obligations to put boots on the ground and endure a long war. Since global politics is drifting into a post-alliance phase, India needs to invest more in pursuing strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

To sum up, India's location in the hierarchy of power relations in global politics, the reluctance of major powers to recognise India's territorial integrity as defined by Delhi, and the fraying of alliance relationships in a multipolar world order will prompt India to exercise strategic autonomy in international politics. Additionally, India today has diverse economic, technological, and defence needs, which include greater foreign direct investment (FDI) to strengthen its connectivity infrastructure, sustained and predictable energy supplies, eco-friendly technologies that can facilitate the extraction and refining of rare earth metals, greater engagement with leading technological institutions, collaboration in artificial intelligence and quantum technologies, and fifth-generation fighter technologies. No single country can assist India in meeting these needs at affordable prices. Therefore, it is important for India to diversify its strategic partnerships, which can only happen if Delhi pursues strategic autonomy with greater vigour.

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Sanjay Pulipaka

Sanjay Pulipaka is the Chairperson of the Politeia Research Foundation. He was previously a Senior Fellow for Research Programmes and Strategic Neighbourhood at the Delhi Policy Group, a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum Library, and a Senior Consultant at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Sanjay was a Pavate Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge in the UK and a former Fulbright Fellow in the Conflict Transformation Programme in the United States. He has a substantive publication record, including books, policy reports, numerous research papers, and Op-Ed essays.

INDIAN GRAND STRATEGY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Zorawar Daulet Singh

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President, Vladimir Putin, at Hyderabad House on December 5, 2025. | MEA.

History of Great Power Transitions

The long history of geopolitics and international relations is in many ways about big turning points. A seemingly settled world order or status quo gets disrupted and then unravels. The underlying cause of a power shift is the uneven rate of growth in comprehensive national power in the international system. This changing balance of power depends on many factors, the main ones being structural changes in the demographic, economic and technological bases of the rising powers, accompanied by a period of sustained political stability which enables them to acquire a greater share of global production and wealth.

Power shifts could also result from wasteful military interventions, imperial overstretch, political implosion, or a failure to innovate and adapt that precipitates a relative decline among the dominant powers. Today, we are witnessing a combination of both these processes playing out in the dominant and rising powers. For instance, the high noon of Asian prosperity when China and India were at the apex of the world economic system for over a millennium up to the 18th century seemed stable and enduring.

Yet, the Atlantic, or what we refer to as the maritime West, gradually surpassed and then overran these formidable Asian empires and polities with their gunboats, technologies and hard-nosed statecraft. This was a dramatic shock with lasting consequences for world politics.

Another turning point would be the emergence of a multipolar system in 19th-century Europe

with a global periphery around it. The balance of power, as a legitimate concept to regulate this crowded geopolitical order of multiple rising powers, was established as a concept in the foreign offices across Europe.

But this did not stop the hegemonic aspirations of some powers, who made the fatal error of violently rewriting the status quo. The devastating world wars in the 20th century tell us just how gruelling the concept of the balance of power became in practice when it was challenged and then restored at enormous cost by a concert of powers.

And so the historical cycle repeats – power shifts occur through a process of complex changes at multiple levels of the international system that unsettle an established order, which is then restored by the most capable great powers who reform or create the norms, institutions and security architectures for the new status quo.

We are again at one of those big moments in world history. The power transition is not occurring through unrestrained violence like in the pre-nuclear age, when a great power war to the finish was the primary means of changing the international order. It is true that the ongoing war in Ukraine is in many ways a modern version of a great power war that remains limited largely because of the contemporary features of the military-technological environment. But, broadly, it can be said that international life has grown more sophisticated with the advent of nuclear weaponry, along with reduced incentives and enormous costs to directly conquer territories and peoples.

Yet, the essence remains the same. An order that is not supported by the material and normative pillars to nourish, preserve and legitimise it becomes unsustainable, and the challengers – that is, those powers who were excluded or were on the margins of the previous fraying status quo – will seek a greater share of benefits and status for their states.

How this process of competition and jostling for influence unfolds is typically shaped by the strategic cultures of the key actors in this drama, and how each formulates their national interests, world order visions, and the effectiveness with which they supply international public goods. This is important to emphasise: the precise outcomes of power shifts are rarely predictable because they are contingent on many factors, with every major participant possessing a vote in this dynamic and determining how they pursue change in the international order.

What would be India's Vote in this Dynamic? Indian Statecraft before Multipolarity

Since we are likely to see a measure of continuity but also profound change in India's foreign policy and geostrategy, it might be useful to look at previous international environments and world orders to understand how India navigated previous settings. The future is likely to draw from these phases in terms of lessons, concepts and even established practices in statecraft. Before the recent outbreak of multipolarity, there have been three eras that have shaped India's strategic culture.

It is important to begin with British India. While this phase is mostly remembered for its colonial plunder and cultural destruction — from which India is still recovering its previous material and civilisational position in the world system — the ideational impact on India's worldviews relating to the regional geopolitical chessboard has left a deep imprint on its strategic culture.

Specifically, much of the period from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century was defined by the so-called 'Great Game' – the rivalry and confrontation between Britain and Russia for influence in various parts of Eurasia. This rivalry, and the fact that India had no sovereignty, meant that the subcontinent became the spearhead and great power base to sustain this continental competition. It led to the creation of buffer states and the ring system of defence around India, ostensibly to keep Russia out and the British permanently in a position of primacy over this region, along with an ability to project power further east in the Western Pacific.

Even on British China policy, India provided enormous leverage in Asian geopolitics not only to advance the forced opening of China during the 19th century but also to enable a robust system of forward control on China's southwestern periphery, again with the aim of accessing continental Eurasia. India, in other words, was a western sentinel and an indispensable instrument in the great power competition of that epoch.

The 'loss' of India after 1947 was only partially compensated by the creation of Pakistan, which was envisioned from the outset in Anglo-American geostrategy to resume some of the roles played previously by British India. But it was always envisioned by some western strategists — and in India too — that India would eventually resume the role of a western sentinel in Asia.

In the mid-1940s, the Indian peninsula was again perceived in western grand strategy as US scholar Nicholas Spykman's quintessential Rimland state, located on the periphery of the Eurasian continent and one of the keys to penetrate the Eurasian heartland and prosecute the strategy of containment after 1945, which in essence was a resumption and expansion of the 19th-century Great Game.

The outbreak of the Cold War was the first opportunity for India's leaders to articulate a worldview for the new phase. India rejected the idea that it was going to be a regional lynchpin for the West, since it now had its own sovereign destiny and confronted the formidable task of recovering from the unprecedented material losses of the colonial era.

This led to the posture and policy of non-alignment in the 1950s, which was fundamentally rooted in the belief that India was detaching itself from the escalating great power rivalry between the collective West and the Eurasian great powers, a rivalry that took on an even more aggressive form with the Cold War conflicts in Asia.

Indian leaders also quickly discovered that independent states had little space – indeed, Indian sovereignty needed to be substantially rolled back for the Eurasian containment strategy to find its full expression in Asia. India therefore refused to define world politics in a stark zero-sum fashion that would erase every other national identity and interest and subordinate them to the priorities of one of the superpower-led blocs.

Although viewed as common sense and pragmatic today, the non-aligned policy was novel at the time and invited intense pressure from both sides, more so from the maritime West, for whom independent powers were an obstacle to gaining access to the gates of Greater Eurasia.

A key feature of non-alignment included military neutrality — that is, one great power's geopolitical conflicts do not automatically become India's responsibility to solve or participate in. During British India, it was presumed that British rivalries were to be applied to India, which was meant to step up as a security provider in any allied cause.

An independent India rejected this concept both as a principle and a practice. When viewed from today's vantage point, it might appear that non-alignment was in essence advocating the cause of a plural multipolar world where various ideologies, civilisations and socio-economic systems could coexist.

Non-alignment refused to endorse the moral superiority of any particular model and instead trod an organic path of letting a hundred flowers bloom, with the most durable ideas prevailing over time. This approach also paid rich dividends in drawing economic and military assistance from otherwise competing powers, thereby contributing to Indian security and economic development during its most vulnerable decades.

Non-alignment was flexible and pragmatic enough to even leverage one superpower in times of a grave regional crisis during 1971 and in the two decades after that, until the end of the Cold War. But this was not an accident: it was India mentally remapping its own place in Eurasia's strategic geography and pursuing a balance-of-power policy to confront the twin challenge at the time from a continental great power (China) and a maritime superpower (the US) — the ultimate G-2 challenge.

The balance of power again transformed in the 1990s. The unipolar moment challenged the idea that India could stand apart from great power rivalries while striving for a space to establish its own geopolitical and developmental model. Indeed, during the 1990s and a few years thereafter, there was just one great power in the system with no countervailing options to cushion the power imbalance.

India responded with a mixture of engagement — the rapprochement and normalisation with the US and G-7 countries was the big foreign policy development of that decade — and sovereign resistance in select but crucial areas for its future.

India also reconceived its national interest with economic growth as the core objective of foreign policy. This was similar to China's reform and opening-up policy, whereby rapidly integrating into the global economy became the priority for Indian policymakers. We often refer to this phase as the neoliberal era, where geopolitics was kept in the background to allow economic interdependence to flourish. This phase peaked in 2008, with the Global Financial Crisis marking the beginning of the end of the unipolar moment.

In many ways, India's foreign and security policies over the past century are a series of reorientations and modifications within a geopolitical discourse and framework conceived by the maritime West, looking at the strategic value of this area from the outside and for their own purposes.

> **A multipolar world setting, with its centre of gravity shifting to Eurasia, will require India to develop an alternative geopolitical framework — looking at the broader region from within, rather than via an offshore great power's prism whose security imperatives are inevitably going to be different and unpredictable.**

Multipolarity and its Implications for India

There are three novel features about today's multipolar world, each with significant implications for Indian statecraft in the years ahead.

First, we are seeing a geo-cultural change from the western civilisation-led order to a multi-civilisational order. What makes the present power shifts truly unique is that they are occurring outside the confined spaces of the geo-cultural and geopolitical West. For the past half-millennium, the rise and fall of

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with other SCO leaders at Tianjin SCO Summit on August 31, 2025. | Times of India.

great powers was exclusively a western affair, with each power being displaced by an even larger and more formidable one from within a common geopolitical and geo-civilisational space.

From the Italian city-states, Holland, Portugal and Spain, France, and later England and then Germany and finally the US, each of these players assumed the mantle of leadership over the international order. But for the past 500 years, the fundamental civilisational values and strategic cultures between these different western powers were more alike than distinct, allowing for a cohesive hegemony after every major transition. This cycle of the baton being passed from one western power to another has been permanently broken.

The rise — or the return — of major powers in Greater Eurasia (China, Russia, India, Iran, Indonesia, to mention a few) is a departure from this long pattern. This leaves open the possibility that world order will be built around non-western ideas that are still evolving. What we can say is that world order is not going to be built on a homogeneous idea, given the diversity of strategic experiences and ideologies among the Eurasian players. The emerging multipolar order is in its essence plural and cannot have a universal ideology as its normative edifice.

For India, to be part of a world order where non-western civilisations are seen as equal members of the international community — and not as identities and cultures to be modified, reformed or erased — is something that obviously bodes well for the evolution of Indian nationhood too. Indeed, one of the key virtues of today's power shift relates to the domestic realms of rising powers, who now have an international context to develop their social systems and cultures without the existential threat of a hostile universal ideology.

The second feature of today's multipolar world is in the geoeconomic and technological realm. Historically, the pace of change in a power shift has been directly linked to the rapidity with which the dominant power or bloc's technological advantages are diffused to its competitors and rising powers.

One of the novel features of the contemporary power transition is the relatively rapid development of comprehensive national power, including economic power, outside the US-led bloc in recent decades. There is little historical precedent for this, and it explains much of the erratic policy rhetoric and behaviour from the collective West — because it has occurred under their watch and partly as a consequence of their own specific policies towards globalisation in the past three decades. But the horse of this diffusion of power has already bolted!

As a contrast, during the peak of British hegemony in the mid-to-late 19th century, there was a high degree of concentration of economic and military technologies, while the pace of diffusion of power to the periphery was slow, despite the intensive globalisation and trade during that era. The collapse of political authority in Asia was of course the main reason. It is almost impossible to freeze the spread of knowledge and innovation today because several capable rising powers now possess the domestic conditions and scientific infrastructure to absorb, adapt, create and field new technologies in civilian and military spheres.

The present picture of the top eight leading economies (in terms of GDP, PPP) would have been unimaginable a generation ago: it includes China, India, Russia, Brazil and Indonesia. Only the US, Germany and Japan represent the US-bloc. The changing structure of global industrial capabilities is equally stark: in the year 2000, the G-7 accounted for over 70 percent of global production; by 2030, it is the non-West that is projected to account for nearly 70 percent of global production.

In terms of strategic commodities, energy resources, industrial technologies and scalable human capital, Greater Eurasia is already the centre of the world economy, albeit in

an uneven distribution among the various great and regional powers. At an aggregate level, the preponderance of the G-7 has been permanently broken, and this implies very different production and supply chains from those that existed in the pre-multipolar era. The prospect of the non-West being equal partners with the West in economic interdependence — if not leading certain supply chains — is now all too real.

India's challenge is resetting its geoeconomic compass from a West-centric economy to a Eurasian-oriented economy with a global footprint. In some sectors, the adjustment will be easier, and in some areas restructuring production chains, financial networks and even entire sectors of the domestic economy will require major policy reform. From a connectivity standpoint too, India is putting in place various projects and initiatives that aim to develop lines of communication in terms of transport networks and corridors with Greater Eurasia from multiple directions.

Finally, we come to the geopolitical. The geographic areas of structural competition on the global chessboard are shifting away from the Euro-Atlantic to Greater Eurasia and the Western Pacific.

In the epic struggle between western maritime powers and Eurasian continental powers, India's geographic position on the Rimland of Greater Eurasia, with a direct frontier with one of the great powers, China, provides the contemporary context for Indian statecraft. Previously, during the Cold War, the subcontinent was generally seen to be at the periphery of the superpower rivalry, with its core being in Europe. This had provided India with limited manoeuvring room to advance its own geopolitical influence in the area as well as carve out a domestic development model.

Has this Changed Today?

Undoubtedly, the rise of China has transformed the geopolitical setting across Asia and around the subcontinent, both in terms of military security and geoeconomics. A contiguous great power as India's largest neighbour, with a complicated history of territorial disputes and different visions of regional order, means Indian statecraft cannot reapply past balance-of-power concepts in the same way.

The power realities have changed, making the idea of India as a western sentinel and security lynchpin in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific area appear outdated and posing high risk in the emerging multipolar setting — especially when seen from the unique configuration of the subcontinent's security system. Regional crises in recent years attest to this point, where India's external balancing options have revealed their limits.

That being said, if the impending contest is between a Greater Eurasian alignment and a maritime Pacific bloc led by the US, that geoeconomic and security competition will be waged primarily in the core zone of the Western Pacific and in lesser intensity in other sub-regions of Eurasia. NATO's strategic defeat in Ukraine suggests the axis of struggle will shift to the east. If this is the 'Great Game' of the future, then India can regain strategic room and extend its window of opportunity to pursue its domestic transformation by choosing to focus on stabilising its primary region of the subcontinent through a mixture of détente and renewed engagement with China, while simultaneously cultivating several other strategic partnerships.

More broadly, there are two levels of change in this transition to multipolarity. One is the global contest between continental Eurasia and the maritime West to establish the future contours and ground rules of the new world order. The other is an intra-Eurasian order-building process to promote geopolitical stability and deeper economic interdependence, while also maintaining a power equilibrium that blocks any easy pathways to hegemony by any single power — with the obvious reference being China.

India has deep stakes in both these geopolitical processes that are unfolding simultaneously.

We are likely to see this manifest in its statecraft through sustained engagement and investment in several areas, but also military neutrality on certain conflict zones and potential flashpoints. India's grand strategic goal is promoting global multipolarity and co-creating more inclusive and responsive governance norms through institutions such as BRICS, while also promoting Eurasian multipolarity, interdependence and co-developing regional institutions to manage complex security problems.

Ultimately, multipolarity means India reimagining the broader region's geopolitics and making intelligent policy adjustments with all the great powers. While many strategists still insist that China is the only existential challenge for India, this is inevitable only to the extent that India is an active participant in the new Great Game. India's China problem, ironically, is more manageable when India pursues an independent foreign policy than when it takes on the burden-sharing role of managing distant security flashpoints and hotspots in concert with the maritime West.

This realistic approach to statecraft might sound remarkably similar to the Cold War era, except that the stakes for India are far more real because of the transformation in the military-technological setting in the subcontinent and beyond.

The big ideational shift in Indian grand strategy will occur when India begins seeing itself less as a piece of real estate in Spykman's framework to hem in a Greater Eurasia and more as a vital pillar in the Eurasian-Pacific multipolar order. Thus, India's future role should be less of a spoiler and more of a stakeholder and beneficiary in the multipolar setting. When viewed from such a vision, the often-heard claim that India must make a strategic choice to swing towards one side makes little geopolitical sense, because India has vital material and civilisational interests in shaping the entirety of the ongoing historical power shifts underway.

(First published in The Week on November 21, 2025)

Zorawar Daulet Singh

Zorawar Daulet Singh is an author and foreign affairs analyst based in New Delhi. He is an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. Daulet Singh holds a PhD in international relations from King's College London. For the past 15 years, he has been a commentator and columnist on India's foreign policy and its role in world order, diplomatic history and various dimensions of India–China relations. His recent book on India-China relations, *Powershift: India-China relations in a Multipolar World*, received the Kalinga Literary Festival Book of the Year Award 2020-21 in the category of Diplomacy/Strategic Affairs.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Shashi Tharoor

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a debate in the Lok Sabha on the Pahalgam terror attack and Operation Sindoor, on July 29, 2025. | Sansad TV via PTI.

Introduction

In the lexicon of international relations, few concepts have evolved as dynamically as "strategic autonomy". Once a term confined to academic debate, it now sits at the heart of India's foreign policy discourse, shaping decisions in an increasingly multipolar and volatile world.

As global power shifts accelerate and traditional alliances fray, India finds itself navigating a delicate path between competing giants: the United States, China and Russia. The pursuit of strategic autonomy is no longer a theoretical aspiration. It is a daily diplomatic practice, fraught with complexity and consequence.

Strategic autonomy refers to a nation's ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy and defence without being constrained by external pressures or alliance obligations. It is not synonymous with isolationism or neutrality. Rather, it implies flexibility, independence and the capacity to engage with multiple powers on one's own terms.

For India, the concept has deep historical roots, going back to colonial subjugation and free India's determination never to let anybody else decide our place in the world for us. From Nehru's non-alignment during the Cold War to the Modi government's "multi-alignment" in the current era, successive governments have sought to preserve India's freedom of action

while adapting to changing geopolitical realities.

In theory, strategic autonomy offers a middle path between rigid bloc politics and passive disengagement. In practice, it demands deft diplomacy, institutional resilience, and a clear-eyed understanding of national interest. It is a balancing act — sometimes precarious, often imperfect, but essential for a country such as India that aspires to global leadership without becoming a client state.

The Paths and Hurdles for India

The current global landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for India's strategic autonomy. The unipolar moment of American dominance has given way to a fragmented world order, where China's assertiveness, Russia's revisionism and the West's internal divisions, accentuated by Washington's unpredictability, create a fluid and unpredictable environment. For India, this means recalibrating its relationships with major powers while safeguarding its core interests — territorial integrity, economic growth, technological advancement, and regional stability.

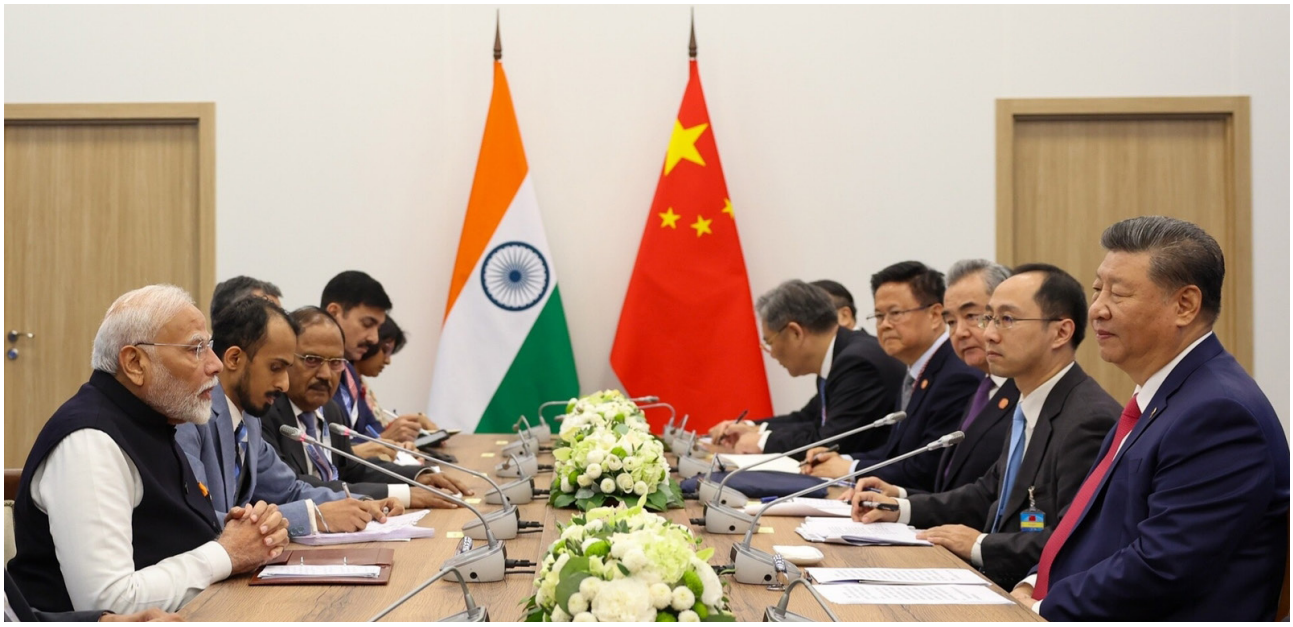
India's relationship with the United States has deepened dramatically over the past two decades. From defence cooperation and intelligence sharing to joint military exercises and technology transfers, the strategic partnership has matured. The Quad grouping (Australia, Japan India, the US), Indo-Pacific dialogues, the incipient I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the US) and India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), and shared concerns over China's rise have further cemented ties.

Yet, the relationship is not without friction. The Trump administration's erratic trade policies, followed by stinging tariffs and sanctions in his second term, have strained economic ties. Washington's pressure on India to reduce its energy and defence dealings with Russia, and to align more closely with western positions, has tested New Delhi's resolve.

India's response has been measured. It continues to engage with the US, maintains independent positions on global conflicts, and insists on the primacy of national interest over ideological alignment. This is strategic autonomy in action, not anti-Americanism, but a refusal to be subsumed by American priorities.

Ties with Beijing and Moscow

China presents a more complex challenge. The border clashes with India of 2020 shattered illusions of benign coexistence, and tensions remain high despite diplomatic overtures.



Indian delegation led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese delegation led by President Xi Jinping meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia on October 23, 2024. | @NarendraModi/X.

Yet, China is also one of India's largest trading partners, a key player in regional institutions, and a competitor whose actions shape the strategic environment. India's approach is one of cautious engagement and firm deterrence.

It strengthens border infrastructure, deepens ties with Indo-Pacific partners, and invests in indigenous defence capabilities. At the same time, it participates in multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where China plays a leading role — a difficult but necessary balancing act.

Strategic autonomy here means resisting both confrontation and capitulation. It means asserting sovereignty and refusing to be another country's counterweight to a rising China, while controlling Chinese access to the Indian economy, and simultaneously keeping channels of communication open. It means recognising that rivalry does not preclude diplomacy, and that decoupling is not always desirable or feasible.

India's relationship with Russia is rooted in Cold War solidarity, defence cooperation and shared strategic interests. Despite Moscow's growing closeness to Beijing and Russia's global isolation following the Ukraine conflict, India has maintained its ties — buying oil, importing weapons, and engaging diplomatically. This has drawn criticism from western capitals, but India has stood firm.

Its relationship with Russia is historical, multidimensional and not subject to external veto. It continues to diversify its military imports, invest in indigenous production and explore new partnerships, but without abandoning old ones. Strategic autonomy here is about refusing to choose sides in a binary contest, and, instead, crafting a foreign policy that reflects India's unique geography, history and aspirations.

During India's G-20 presidency in 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India was now the voice of the Global South — unbowed, plural and potent. Its democracy, he said, was not just a system but a "bouquet of hope", nourished by the strength of its multilingual, multicultural fabric. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argues that partnerships must be shaped by interest, not sentiment or inherited bias.

This is diplomacy with a spine — assertive, pragmatic, and unapologetically Indian, seeking to be "non-West" without being "anti-West". This stance resonates across the Global South, where many rising and middle powers concerned with peace and stability in their own regions, are choosing to safeguard their geopolitical and economic interests rather than be swept into the vortex of great-power rivalries. They seek agency, not alignment; voice, not vassalage.

What emerges is a vision of India as a sovereign pole in a rebalancing world — a nation that neither aligns blindly nor isolates itself. India's rise, then, is civilisational, plural and deeply political. While India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is principled, it faces headwinds as it walks the tightrope among the major powers. The global economy is increasingly interdependent, and technological ecosystems are dominated by a few players. Defence modernisation requires partnerships and climate diplomacy demands coordination. In such a world, autonomy must be redefined — not as isolation, but as resilience and adaptability.

Domestic factors also play a role. Political polarisation, economic vulnerabilities and institutional constraints can limit the effectiveness of autonomous decision-making. Strategic autonomy requires not just diplomatic skill, but economic strength, technological capability and political coherence. We cannot be truly autonomous from a position of weakness.

Moreover, in a world of cyber threats, Artificial Intelligence warfare and space competition, autonomy must extend beyond traditional domains. It must encompass data sovereignty, digital infrastructure and supply chain security. India's recent efforts to build indigenous platforms, secure critical minerals and assert its voice in global tech governance are steps in this direction.

Strategic autonomy is not just a slogan. It is a strategy. It is the art of navigating a turbulent world without losing one's bearings. As the global order shifts, India must continue steadily to walk the tightrope — engaging with the US without becoming a vassal, deterring China without provoking war, and partnering with Russia without inheriting its isolation. It must invest in capabilities, cultivate partnerships, and assert its interests with clarity and confidence.

In doing so, India does not reject the world — it reclaims its agency within it. Strategic autonomy is not about standing alone; it is about standing straight, and standing tall.

(First published in The Hindu on September 6, 2025)

Shashi Tharoor

Shashi Tharoor is an author, politician and former international diplomat who straddles several worlds of experience. At present, he is a fourth-term Member of Parliament, from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, in the Lok Sabha. He has served as a Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development in the Government of India during the second term of the United Progressive Alliance. At present, Dr Tharoor is the chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, he has previously chaired the Parliamentary Standing Committees on External Affairs (2014-19), Information Technology (2019-21) and Chemicals & Fertilizers (2021-24).

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: ROLE AND DIMENSIONS

T S Tirumurti

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar greets the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2025 in New York. | Bharat Express.

Historical Evolution

Strategic autonomy in simple terms is the creation of space by countries for independent decision-making in accordance with their national interests. India has traditionally been a country that has fiercely defended its strategic space. This should not surprise us.

Without trying to unduly glorify the past, we need to acknowledge that, as a civilisational power, India has had a plethora of texts over centuries, such as the *Arthashastra, Nitisara, Shukra Neeti, Tirukkural* etc which laid down normative standards for statecraft and geopolitics. This was reinforced by our struggle for independence, during which Mahatma Gandhi drew from our texts and philosophy, and fashioned unique but practical tools – *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* – (truth and non-violence), to throw the British out.

Another historical overlay was the contribution of Buddhist thought and philosophy to our collective thinking. Without turning our backs to the West, India as a colony, also imbibed Western notions of nation-states and international norms of conduct. Consequently, there was an unmistakable impact of history on our thoughts on statecraft and international relations, which shaped our post-independent posture of strategic autonomy.

It was, therefore, no surprise that at the turn of our independence, Prime Minister Nehru envisaged active engagement with world problems without joining either of the two Cold War camps and took an independent stand. This was nothing but expanding the strategic space for India without giving it a name. Newly

independent countries looked for options other than becoming superpower camp followers and India offered a way out. Non-alignment shaped the thinking of much of the developing world for decades.

In many ways, strategic autonomy for India was a given since it was deeply embedded in our psyche. India did not become a treaty alliance partner of any of the major powers. Whether as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement or as a nuclear power or the fourth largest economy or as a country contributing to global good and global commons, India charted its own path. And it served us well.

Strategic Autonomy & Leadership

Further, strategic autonomy is also about leadership. Non-alignment not only gave us the strategic space to make independent decisions but also propelled us to the leadership of the developing world. The developing world saw in India a nation that could offer a third option and not kowtow to the dictates of the superpowers. Therefore, many of those questioning India's policy of strategic autonomy do not appreciate the fact that it is as much a path towards leadership as it is a means of autonomy in decision-making.

Only a country that makes independent decisions can offer alternatives to other countries. Questioning India's quest for strategic autonomy is to question India's quest for leadership and contemporary India's potential re-emergence as a civilizational force.

India's recent policy of multi-alignment is focused on much of the same objective – achieving strategic autonomy in a globalized world, where even adversaries are closely interconnected and conduct intense business with each other. It is a pragmatic and necessary policy – an evolution to suit contemporary realities. Multi-alignment helps India navigate the inter se contradictions between its friends and ensure that its national interests are met. While it continues to serve India well to protect its strategic space, multi-alignment, unlike non-alignment, is not a recipe for leadership per se. This is a matter that needs to be specially addressed. And why is leadership necessary for strategic autonomy?

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on January 15, 2018. | The Hindu.

When India has global ambitions of its own, multi-alignment by itself is not enough especially when the world is undergoing geopolitical churning. In a fragmenting world order, geopolitics, threats and protectionism are determining economic and technological outcomes, not the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status nor free trade nor the World Trade Organisation (WTO) led trade norms. Therefore, to get its economic and technological trajectory right, and protect its strategic space, India needs to get its geopolitics right.

Geoeconomics & Geopolitics

In the last two decades, India has, rightly, prioritized economic growth, both under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the earlier National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. This catapulted India to the fourth largest economy. Having reached there, some argue that India should do more of the same i.e keep its head down and focus on becoming the third largest economy etc.

The argument is that a larger geopolitical role may hurt India's economic growth. That template is now broken. In fact, the contrary is true. While it is no one's case that India should not focus on its economy, the path to become a bigger economy is through getting the geopolitics right rather than merely playing by MFN rules. In other words, to get its geo-economics right, India needs to be much more proactive to protect and expand its "geopolitical elbow room". The bigger India becomes, the greater will be its stakes in the outcome of global conflicts.

However, India had been largely silent on the Israel-Gaza war or on Israel-Iran conflict and American bombings in June 2025, though we have important relations with all these parties, including our proximity with Israel, principled stand on Palestine, funding of Chabahar port in Iran and numerous stakes in the Gulf. Though India rightly abstained on UN votes on the Ukraine conflict, we have failed to stay engaged with the war. Our overall approach of not taking a proactive stand on global conflicts and remaining on the sidelines is hurting our larger interests and impacting our strategic autonomy. Operation Sindoor shows us that if we seek greater engagement by our partners with our conflicts, we need to engage more with their conflicts and issues.

In fact, the international community expects us to play a global role, especially when we are aspiring for permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC). If, in UNSC, India claims that decisions are not credible without permanent participation of India, then this logic applies equally to decisions taken outside the narrow confines of the Security Council.

The flip side is that if we do not meet these expectations, we are ceding strategic space to countries like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Italy, to tackle conflicts globally whether in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, or Indo-Pacific, where our stakes are high. Not all of them necessarily have India's interests in mind. We are already witnessing the growing profile of Pakistan in the US and in the Gulf (with the signing of Saudi-Pakistan Mutual Defence Agreement), and countries like Turkiye moving in to fill vacant space presenting us with a *fait accompli* detrimental to us. Thus, not taking a proactive role in global conflicts will also adversely affect our strategic autonomy in decision-making.

The question is not whether we need to re-examine our policy of strategic autonomy but whether we have been able to expand that space and use the opportunities created by such a policy to achieve our ends. This is where our record has been uneven.

For example, in both WTO and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Indian negotiators have negotiated hard to buy more time to meet our developmental milestones but we have not been able to capitalize on it. In textiles and clothing, we won a hard-fought battle in the WTO and got more time – strategic space – but during that extended period we failed to reform the sector leaving us well behind competitors like Vietnam or Bangladesh.

We have had a somewhat similar experience with climate action. China, for example, used the extended period to embark on a high carbon growth trajectory for development, whereas India failed to use the same window to utilize our quota of the carbon budget for

our development. As we witnessed in the UN Climate Change Convention Conference of Parties in Belem, Brazil in November 2025, this strategic space is shrinking with pressure on India to phase-out coal – something not immediately feasible.

Conclusion

Consequently, given the sui generis situation India is in, instinctively or by design, strategic autonomy is the default mode of Indian strategic thought. There is no reason to deviate from this since it has served India well. However, there is definitely a need to effectively utilize the space created with our policies and have a sharper focus on achieving our goals, including providing leadership. This is crucial to navigating the global churn.

T S Tirumurti

T S Tirumurti has had a distinguished diplomatic career spanning 37 years (1985-2022). He was India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from May 2020 to June 2022. His previous roles include Secretary (Economic Relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs, High Commissioner to Malaysia, and the first Representative to the Palestinian Authority. While India was on the UN Security Council (2021-2022), he chaired the Counter-Terrorism Committee and presided over the Council in August 2021. He is currently a Distinguished Professor in Indian Institute of Technology Madras in Chennai.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: THEIR MEANING FOR INDIA

D B Venkatesh Varma

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi chairs a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security in New Delhi on April 23, 2025. | ANI.

Introduction

In Indian foreign policy, the term strategic autonomy is of a more recent vintage. The key question during the Cold War was whether India would align itself with one of the two blocs. Non-alignment was the answer- both as a national policy and as a movement. Non-alignment had its critics-both during the Cold War and after, but its centrality as an organising principle for India's foreign policy during that period was not disputed.

On the key question during the past three decades of the post-Cold War period, one of US primacy and its domination of globalisation, Indian foreign policy found it difficult to settle on a single organising principle - veering from Non-Alignment 2.0 to multi-alignment, rules-based international order to multipolarity or some combination of other passing fads. The drift reflected the inherent ambiguity in India's self perception of where it stood in a changing global order.

During the hey days of globalisation - the first two decades of this century - strategic autonomy was frowned upon, as an archaic concept that prevented India from securing the benefits of US led-globalisation. The latter's fragmentation after the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of protectionism in trade and technology relations and the advent of sanctions as an instrument of pressure on India emanating from conflicts of the West with Iran, Venezuela and

now Russia tilted the balance in Indian foreign policy thinking away from a more romantic vision of the benefits of global engagement.

If there were any doubts, these were set aside by India becoming the target of US pressure under the Trump Administration. After meandering for a while, India seemed to have now settled with strategic autonomy as an anchor if not the most important characteristic of Indian foreign policy. However, its meaning remains vague; its context varied and it is often used for multiple and sometimes contradictory purposes.

Working Definition

This article intends to unpack the meaning of strategic autonomy through delineating its four dimensions- declaratory, operational, economic/technological and societal. It is, however, necessary to first start with a working definition to set out the parameters, since strategic autonomy is often used as a synonym for an independent foreign policy or for Make-in-India or *Atmanirbharta* or even as justification for multi-alignment or the pursuit of multi-polarity. This is partly due to the general nature of the term but more importantly due to the fact that it is often used for multiple purposes, such as to generalise a specific problem, to obfuscate a policy decision or very often as a convenient tool to avoid difficult options. As a slogan, it is difficult to argue against as it has a 'motherhood-and-apple pie' quality about it but as a national objective to be achieved in specific terms and targets, its complexities come to the fore.

A working definition of strategic autonomy must first pay attention to its first phrase 'strategic,' for it is here that the main source of confusion arises. While in common usage 'strategic' is anything that is central or critical or long-term, in the realm of strategic studies 'strategic' implies the study of the use of armed force for national security objectives through finding balance between ends and means.

Hence, a working definition of strategic autonomy could be 'the will and capacity to think and act independently on matters of war and peace that affect the vital interests of the country.' Seen from this standpoint, strategic autonomy is but a subset of an independent foreign policy, not co-terminus with it, even as one is a necessary condition for the fulfilment of the other.

In terms of scope, strategic autonomy focuses mainly but not exclusively on the country's ability and willingness to engage in the use of armed force to secure its national interests without being unduly constrained by externally determined factors. In terms of national objectives, strategic autonomy is both a policy prescription and a pathway to prioritise, mobilise, and channelize national resources to fulfil long-term objectives that impinge on its national security interests.

In other words, strategic autonomy is both the process as well as the end point of how India wishes to secure its national security interests that involve the use of armed force *for objectives that are nationally determined and through resources that are nationally mobilised*. In the international context, a key question for assessing strategic autonomy is where does engagement create dependencies that in turn slip into vulnerabilities that impede the country's willingness and capability to use force independently? Strategic autonomy ceases to be autonomous when that redline is crossed.

Declaratory Dimension

In recent years, strategic autonomy has been referred to both as a characteristic and objective of India's foreign policy. The context is often to assert India's independent view on a contentious global issue. However, contradictions tend to appear when strategic autonomy is juxtaposed with multi-alignment or our adherence to a rule based international order when in fact many of the challenges to India's autonomy arise from that very order, as in the case of the imposition of secondary sanctions related to the Ukraine conflict.

This concept is also mentioned as an objective of national policies such as Make-in-India or

Atmanirbharta or technological sovereignty. The pursuit of multipolarity in forums such as G20 or BRICS is projected as a means to strengthen India's options in pursuit of strategic autonomy. While the declaratory dimension is often a function of Indian diplomacy - with all its contradictions - the essence of strategic autonomy lies in its operational dimension, which pertains to India's armed forces.

Operational Dimension

Defining the aims of war and the terms under which war is terminated is perhaps the most important attribute of sovereignty, for there is no other state function that defines independence of decision making as issues of war and peace. On numerous occasions the Indian state has demonstrated substantive independence of decision making, the most recent example being Operation Sindoor.

Prior to the launch of Operation Sindoor, India had declared that it reserved the right to use armed force against the perpetrators and sponsors of terrorist attacks across the border even if it was within the nuclear overhang. With changing geopolitical conditions, India's ability to respond to China's growing asymmetric power and its linkages with Pakistan (and perhaps even Bangladesh) will be severely tested. India will have to come up with an updated military doctrine that ensures it is capable of defending India's national security interests based on its national resources - broadly defined to mean military force and the supporting industrial, economic and technological base, with external support only supplementing operational capabilities but not controlling them.

In operational terms, India's military doctrine would be constrained either if its military capacities are critically linked to unreliable external supplies even for a short duration conflict, or its military equipment has external linkages in the name of interoperability that do not preclude a 'kill switch' or the Indian armed forces have external commitments that inhibit their unfettered use for the purposes of India's own national security.

This latter divergence could well occur if there is a large gap between the maritime and continental aspects of India's security. The ability of the Armed Forces to execute a military doctrine even under unfavourable external circumstances would be high only if there is clarity in thought, forward planning and marshalling of limited resources through jointness and doctrinal integration.

A good military doctrine for India should presume that the available external diplomatic

A good military doctrine for India should presume that the available external diplomatic options will be limited. This would reinforce the national will to deal with a huge asymmetry in power with China largely through our own resources. This focus was somewhat blurred till now as there were unreal expectations of the availability of external balancing through mechanisms such as the Quad. With the future of the Quad uncertain, it would be imprudent for our Armed Forces to rely on its deterrent potential against China. At the same time, the elevation of Pakistan in US CENTCOM strategy is an ominous development.

Economic/Technological Dimension

Given the changing nature of warfare, the economic and technological dimensions of national power assume increasing importance. The availability of financial resources for defence is dependent on the growth of the economy but what is equally important is their utilisation in accordance with the military doctrine commensurate with the threat scenario. There is a case to be made for raising the share of defence spending to up to 3% of GDP but there is equally a case to be made that such increases should spur military modernisation rather than be a case of throwing good money after bad.

There has been a welcome emphasis on Make-

in-India or *Atmanirbharta* programmes including participation of the private sector with steady increase in indigenous production becoming the mainstay of procurement for our Armed Forces. However, finding the right balance between indigenous production and doctrinal requirements will not be easy.

On the battlefield it does not matter how India acquired the firepower as long as it is effective and sustainable. Any critical gap on the battle front will derail strategic autonomy, howsoever, well-intentioned the efforts towards indigenisation are.

With regard to technological developments, India's slow and until now underfunded R&D effort poses a particular challenge in balancing external procurement and the cost of strategic autonomy, especially with regard to critical inputs such as space surveillance, aircraft engine transfers, shared data centres, cloud-services or cyber space. All of these create long-term dependencies, with hidden vulnerabilities that could potentially paralyse national security responses to external threats.

The key question for the operational dimension of our military doctrine is to define the line where dependencies slip into vulnerabilities, thereby undercutting capacities for exercise of strategic autonomy. The opening up of the defence sector to private industry and foreign investors is both an opportunity for growth but also a risk of increased dependency that undercuts the primacy that the Indian armed forces ought to enjoy with respect to defence manufacturing in the country.

With NATO countries increasing their defence production by over US $1.5 trillion and over $5 trillion investments expected in the AI and semiconductor industry, Indian domestic capacities in both the defence and high-tech fields run the risk of getting sucked into external priorities drowning domestic ones. A similar challenge might also arise with respect to unregulated defence exports.

In the case of strategic minerals, India faces a tough choice of engagement with the US and Chinese led supply chains with their inherent opportunities and risks for our strategic autonomy. There are no easy answers, but sustained development of indigenous capabilities will ameliorate the situation in the medium term.

If Indian companies and Global Capability Centres use India as only one part of the global supply chain, this will over time erode our strategic autonomy, for there would be several international claimants to India's domestic capabilities. India's vulnerabilities to pressure

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Pokhran Test Range after the nuclear tests were successfully conducted in 1998. | NDTV.

on its markets for textiles, diamonds and marine products as well as procurement of concessional crude supplies from Russia were recently in evidence.

While India would like to work with the West on resilient supply chains, and is keen to enter into FTAs with the advanced economies, we were compelled to give in to pressure on our resilient supply chains in energy from Russia. Unless addressed, such vulnerabilities will naturally erode the material basis for our strategic autonomy in the future.

Societal Dimension

Usually neglected, the societal dimension assumes importance given that India is a growing economy with a young demographic profile whose aspirations guide national goals. The nature of India's growth has been such that a growing middle class in urban settings has been a big beneficiary of India's global engagement, especially in the high-tech sectors. They view with deep concern the new pressure points that have emerged in our relations with the West, such as rising racism and restrictive visa practices.

Despite this, the Indian middle-class aspirations are as much global as they are local and they see no contradiction between the two. However, the loss of young talent abroad will inevitably have a slowing down effect on development of India's own national capabilities. There is huge interest in the youth in joining the Agniveer programme which is yet to fully mature to cater to future battlefield requirements.

The Indian secondary education system is not yet fully geared to provide tech savvy recruits for the Indian armed forces. A national reticence on conflict may also impact the strengthening of strategic autonomy as influential sections in society may be reluctant to make sacrifices for future gain. This is also reflected in the broadly optimistic outlook of the think-tank community with regard to India's external engagement.

Conclusion

Strategic autonomy is both an aspirational concept as well as an operational objective. Its four dimensions are mutually reinforcing though the yardstick of success lies in its operational dimension, without which the other three would fade into insignificance. It is easy to articulate strategic autonomy as a slogan; it is far more important to chart a pathway for its implementation in practice, for, in this troubled world, for India to achieve its destined status as a great power, there is no substitute to embracing strategic autonomy as a genuine national policy and strive for its full implementation. No country has ever risen to great power status if it has not mastered the sinews of war and peace, in other words strategic autonomy.

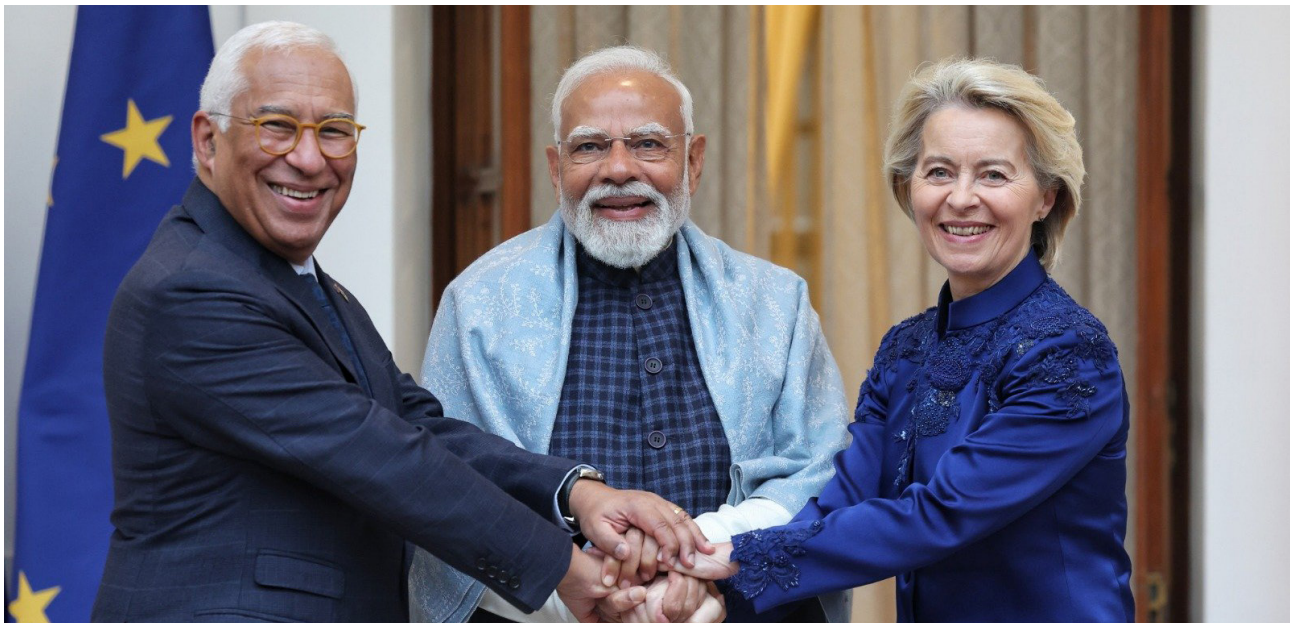
D B Venkatesh Varma

D B Venkatesh Varma has had a long and eminent diplomatic career from 1988 to 2021 during which he worked in the Office of the External Affairs Minister and in the Prime Minister's Office. He has served as India's Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, to the Kingdom of Spain and to the Russian Federation. He is a Distinguished Fellow at the VIF, New Delhi, visiting Professor at SIS JNU, National Institute of Advance Studies, Bangalore, Kautilya School of Public Policy, and Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. He is a member of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters and Member of the National Security Advisory Board of India.

The Economics & Technology

REINFORCING INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FOR THE NEW GLOBAL DISORDER

Jawed Ashraf



European Council President António Costa, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announce the conclusion of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement in New Delhi on January 27, 2026. | @narendramodi/X.

Introduction

An independent economic, foreign and security policy should be axiomatic for a free nation. It should, thus, make the proposition of strategic autonomy as a considered policy choice irrelevant. That, however, is not the reality for most nations in an era of fixed alliances and weak dependencies, where nations seek security and economic benefits through at least a partial surrender of sovereignty in decision making to a more powerful country or a group of nations. This choice has run throughout the course of history, but, perhaps, at no time on such a global scale and reach as in the Cold War period and beyond.

Strategic autonomy reflects a combination of internal decisions and external strategy that best advances a country's national interests without allowing the choice to be dictated by external actors. It entails a capacity to withstand external pressure as much as the will to assert one's interest or position. Strategic autonomy does not imply autarky, isolationism, individualism or disregard of external sensitivities or commitments. It does not preclude partnerships or alignments, or even a varying degree of trade-off between independence and alliance in different situations. This implies that strategic autonomy is not defined by rigid parameters or applies equally in all situations. A country may exercise

autonomy in balancing major powers, but may see gains in embedding itself in a trading bloc. Singapore, for example, maintains strong relations with the US and China, but also acts in accordance with ASEAN consensus. France is a member of NATO and EU, but seeks to maintain, albeit with declining ability, strategic autonomy as the central pillar of its policy.

India's size, scale, geography, economic circumstances and security challenges; the civilizational ethos and the moral foundation of the freedom movement; domestic political traditions; and, self-conception of its place and role in the world put it on the hard but inevitable path of independence in external choices. There were several moments in independent India's journey where the country asserted its will, sometimes standing alone, against the world in pursuit of its interests – from nuclear capabilities to multilateral negotiations.

India's path of non-alignment provided a shield against the binary choices of the Cold War bipolar world and a force multiplier in global affairs. Nonetheless, non-alignment imposed its own constraints. Further, economic and security vulnerabilities, estrangement with the United States, deepening dependence on the Soviet Union and the twin neighbouring challenges of Pakistan and China circumscribed India's choices on occasions.

In the post-Cold War era, India moved deftly to reorient its internal and external economic strategies, transform relations with the United States, sustain the partnership with Russia, improve ties with China (until the beginning of the Xi Jinping era), intensify European engagement, diversify relations with the Gulf and Southeast Asia as near neighbours and expand presence in Africa. It joined multiple global forums, minilaterals and regional organisations, some with conflicting agendas and interests.

India was able to pursue the so-called multi-alignment with strategic autonomy because of historical rejection of bloc politics; handling of relationships on merit with consistency and transparency; and, refusal to take sides in rivalries and conflicts or become an instrument in the strategies of major powers. It drew strength and confidence from a new global attention to its growing economic attractiveness and rising international stature.

India also benefited from a conducive geopolitical space at a time when the trans-Atlantic partnership was cohesive and dominant, the relations between Russia and the West were not so fraught, China was still not a

Indian delegation led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with German delegation led by Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Friedrich Merz in Gandhinagar on January 12, 2026. | MEA.

major power and the US was invested in the economic benefits of China's rise, and a West-driven multilateral system still carried belief in its salience.

India's Strategic Autonomy Under Stress

That geopolitical space is shrinking in a changed world. During the past few years, India's strategic autonomy came under stress. India accelerated the deepening of its strategic partnership with the United States. At the same time, relations with China worsened. This, in turn, increased India's strategic tilt towards the United States, which led, among other things, to the perception of Quad as the central pillar of India's security strategy in the Indo Pacific region. It raised US expectations of the partnership turning into an alliance or amenable to US preferences. Challenges from China ran the risk of creating a new vulnerability to the US.

This also made shielding relations with Russia at a time of conflict between Russia and the West more complex. Weaponization of trade, technology, finance and energy by the West added to the dilemma precisely when our external economic engagement became an essential strand of national transformation. The deeply embedded Indian political tradition of strategic autonomy resisted pressure and promises to navigate through this moment of challenge and temptations.

> **President Trump's decisions and declarations have applied breaks on, if not put in reverse gear, the twenty-five years of transformation in India-US relations. But that is part of a more sweeping reset in the US policy, goals and strategy that has sharpened a trend that has been in the making for over a decade through successive US Administrations.**

The US retreat from the international order that it led in creating but no longer finds useful or attractive, and its growing unilateral use of power, is not just a source of disruption, but also a reflection of a response to internal weaknesses and deeper global structural changes involving global power shifts; ossified and weakened international institutions; use of force replacing rule of law; fracturing alliances and emerging new equations; increasing political trade, technological, digital and financial fragmentation; rising inequalities that are influencing internal politics and external choices; a shift from globalism to protectionism, universalism to nationalism; and transformative power and perils of AI technology.

The emerging distribution of power and shape of the world is uncertain. On the metrics of economic, digital and military power, some expect the future to be a bipolar one between the US and China, or one in which Russia, too, may continue to exercise coercive will. But, the most likely future will be a multipolar one, evident even in its implicit acceptance by President Trump. It will be a world not just of multiple powers, but also of multiple systems, political structures, cultures and world views, without a fixed and predictable pattern of engagement and the coordinating and stabilizing power of an effective multilateral system. The future may range from sharper geopolitical fault lines to an uneasy equilibrium and spheres of influence.

Strategic Autonomy in Action

> **India's strategic autonomy will make it easier for India to adapt to, shape and benefit from an amorphous and unpredictable multipolar world. The global environment will be more challenging, but political stability and continuity, internal cohesion and growing economic, technological, military and convening power give India greater capacity to exercise strategic autonomy.**

This has been evident in two major national security and foreign policy choices in 2025.

The first was India's punitive military operation inside Pakistan after the Pahalgam terrorist attack in April 2025. The second has been a swift move to rebalance ties with major powers after President Trump's disruptive measures. India is renegotiating the terms of its engagement with the United States without caving into pressure and by insisting on the fundamental premise of a *sui generis* relationship of partnership, not alliance, between two sovereign nations.

India is reinvigorating the longstanding strategic partnership with Russia and has moved with caution to ease tensions, normalize relations and explore opportunities with China. It has turned with deeper interest to a beleaguered Europe, itself seeking to adjust to transatlantic rupture, Russian and Chinese pressure and declining competitiveness. Europe lacks strategic heft, but will be a key source of India's economic, technological and military self-reliance. India's policy cannot be framed as an "either-or" choice, but one that manages to establish the right balance of engagement.

Future Pathway

But that will not be enough. India must find a way to address the challenges from Pakistan and an increasingly powerful China. Both weigh heavily on our foreign policy and national security and have an impact on our ability to exercise strategic autonomy. Bold and imaginative diplomatic initiatives may be needed, but these will deliver only if there is intent on the other side, too. Meanwhile, India must continue to reinforce other instruments to strengthen its resilience for independent choices

India will have to do more to secure its interest and influence in South Asia, intensify engagement with Southeast Asia, adjust its strategy in the fast-changing dynamics of the Gulf and West Asia, establish primacy in the Indian Ocean Region and continue the process of expanding ties in Africa and Asia. India must not just speak but also deliver for the Global South. India must have its own sphere of influence. This will strengthen its hand in dealing with major powers. The uncertainty about the nature of future US presence and guarantees in the Indo-Pacific as "public good" also necessitates engagement with Japan, ROK and Australia outside US-led groupings.

Multilateralism enhances space for exercise of strategic autonomy. For all the pessimism around it, India must persist with efforts to reform and revive multilateral institutions. Further, creating coalitions around specific challenges with the spirit of multilateralism, as India has done with initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, will bolster our complex overlapping pattern of relationships and expand international influence. That also applies to the increasing salience of groupings and minilaterals. India has done well to be present in diverse groupings and minilaterals, from the global to extended maritime and continental neighbourhood, some with contradictory and competing objectives.

Trade and investment strategy will play a key role. As the trade regime is shifting from multilateral to regional and bilateral arrangements, India is pursuing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA)/ Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with renewed vigour and confidence, aligning trade agreements with geopolitical priorities and the quest for diversification. These include recent ones with the European Union (EU), European Free Trade Association (EFTA), UK, Australia, UAE and Mauritius; revisions to existing ones and more than ten ongoing or planned negotiations, including with the US and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Further, the quality, scope and coverage of FTAs have increased significantly. That is essential to expand exports and investments, but also to diversify markets, create resilient supply chains and integrate more into Global Value Chains, which constitute the dominant share of global trade. A calibrated opening with China is required in view of its domination of the supply chain, including for the critical bottleneck products.

External engagement must continue to place priority on assured access to critical minerals, energy, technology and the building block of the new age – semiconductors and AI. This is evident in the priorities and initiatives agreed with key global partners. India must also

examine alternative cross-border payment channels and mechanisms, including internationalization of UPI as a remittance channel and the possibility of using alternative forms of digital tokens for trade transactions.

The strongest foundation of strategic autonomy will not just be India's national will, but also the national capacity. This will require:

- Sustained, rapid and inclusive growth with macroeconomic stability and self-reliance or *Atmanirbharta*.
- Rapid industrialization, with high technological capabilities, especially in the industries of the future.
- Boosting domestic demand.
- Energy security and independence through renewables and nuclear energy.
- Digital sovereignty.
- Resilient supply chains.
- Defence self-reliance and readiness.

India needs massive reforms for rapid defence industrialization, which must go beyond assembly of imported platforms. Indigenous capabilities for design, development, metallurgy, advanced electronics and software, testing, qualification and certification are essential – as much in platforms as in components, weapons, sensors, data fusion and communication. That also applies to new domains of cyber, space, the underwater and the seabed. Maintaining a credible nuclear deterrence posture and will is the ultimate guarantor of national sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

India has the most important ingredients for strategic autonomy – national will and historical experience. These are being reinforced by accumulation of material attributes of power. India's strategic autonomy is an imperative not just as a risk mitigation strategy through a turbulent global transition, but also to be a major force in shaping the global future.

Jawed Ashraf

Jawed Ashraf is the Chairman of the India Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO). He is a former High Commissioner of India to Singapore from 2016 to 2020 and Ambassador of India to France and Monaco from 2020 to December 2024. In New Delhi, he held various positions in the Americas Division, including as the Head of the Division, in the Ministry of External Affairs. He served as Joint Secretary (senior staff adviser) in the Prime Minister's Office with former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with the portfolio comprising foreign policy, defence, national security council, atomic energy, space and, briefly, science and technology.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: A GUARANTOR OF NATIONAL STABILITY, SECURITY AND GROWTH

Surya Kanegaonkar

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets the President of the US, Donald Trump at the White House in Washington DC on February 13, 2025. | MEA.

Introduction

Strategic autonomy is a pillar of India's sovereignty. Upholding sovereignty is both a constitutional requirement and a public mandate. India's foreign policy has, in part, been crafted around economic, strategic and security requirements, accounting for the country's endowments and capabilities at any given point in time. Keeping in mind short-term objectives and long-term goals, India has allowed strategic autonomy to take on various shapes and names through the country's journey over the last eight decades.

As the technological and economic transformations of the 21st century alter the balance of global power, the geopolitical, trade and security landscape has become volatile. Uncertainty has grown. The number of variables that contribute to geopolitical outcomes has risen, and these variables are increasingly interrelated. In this context, sovereignty and national security take on new meanings.

As the world's fastest growing major economy with a target of reaching developed status within two decades, India is resource hungry. To raise productivity and growth, the transition

of labor from farm to factory is essential. In the face of rising neo-mercantilism practiced by China and the United States, India consequently pays special attention to unlocking new export markets, securing trade routes and accessing natural resources. Undergirding trade is an international financial system, one that has come under the strain of geopolitics in recent years.

Developing all-weather solutions to transacting, preserving and creating capital has proven essential to bolstering national security. Fractious international relations and proxy wars have raised the specter of armed and hybrid conflicts. The world is also rearming at the fastest pace since World War II against the backdrop of defense technologies breaching new frontiers. Therefore, building credible, indigenous military deterrence is as important as pioneering breakthrough dual-use technologies.

India's path to developed nation status by mid-century involves ensuring sovereign control over determinants of growth, stability and security. The country's three-decade window in which its demographic dividend plays out coincides with great power rivalry, deglobalization, declining trust in post-World War II multilateral institutions, rapid technological advancements, global demographic aging, growing developed market sovereign indebtedness and a rising frequency in covert and overt conflicts.

Strategic autonomy will therefore continue to evolve in scope and scale, and in lockstep with national goals and national security requirements. Calibrated against current and expected changes in the dynamics of international relations and geopolitics, a nimble foreign policy is designed to secure India's growth and re-emergence as a global economic, continental and maritime power.

Over the next twenty-five years, the GDPs of China and the US are expected to converge between the $37 and $42 trillion mark while India would reach around three fifths the size of the US.[1] It would mean that India would be where China is relative to the US in 2025. Because of its comprehensive national power, China is currently considered a near peer of the US despite a significant gap in per capita GDP.

Fractious domestic politics, relative loss of economic dominance and a strategic overstretch threaten the tenability of US-led unipolarity.[2] As the international landscape naturally shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity, cooperation based on converging interests will take precedence. India does not see the emergence of a new world order as a part of a zero-sum game in which the end state is unipolarity and full-spectrum hegemony of any one power. Navigating a turbulent transition phase marked by great power rivalry and risks of the Thucydides trap requires reformed multilateralism.

Therefore, India aims to be a stabilizing, self-reliant, autonomous force that seeks mutual benefit through engagement rather than an actor which actively undercuts the development of others. Policymakers and leaders will, however, act when interests of any power impinge on national security and sovereignty. Altogether, New Delhi's choices, dilemmas, and positioning highlight the continued salience and complexity of strategic autonomy. This article examines the doctrine's meaning, its trajectory, and its layered economic, diplomatic, and security consequences, finally extrapolating the likely contours of India's strategic autonomy in the coming decades.

Strategic Autonomy Defined

Strategic autonomy in India's context refers to the capacity to:

- Pursue national interests independently, especially in foreign relations, defense, technology and economic policy.
- Actively engage a range of major global actors and institutions.
- Continuously develop comprehensive

national power that ensures the country's stability, security and growth. Unlike non-alignment, which symbolized in its ideal form, equidistance from power blocs and avoidance of entanglement, strategic autonomy is a dynamic strategy of selective, human-centric and interest-driven engagement.

It is a guiding principle of India's international posture. Recent policymakers have transitioned from doctrinal abstraction to practical, modular engagement with leading global powers including the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union, technological powerhouses like South Korea and Japan, and emerging nations of the Global South. Should a rising power like India maintain this approach and forge robust partnerships, reformed multilateralism and re-globalization will emerge.

When great powers which come dangerously close to conflict have a stake in India's rise, New Delhi's ability to mediate and create stability will become pronounced. As the country's share of global economic output rises, this effect will be pronounced. India's rise – driven in part by exercising strategic autonomy – is therefore, ultimately a net benefit for the international community.

India's foreign policy transformation towards clearly defined strategic autonomy draws upon several approaches:

- **Targeted de-hyphenation**: Engagement with multiple states independently, not as derivative of one another unless an alliance impinges on core security interests.
- **Modular Partnerships**: Forming coalitions in specific sectors like security, trade, climate management, and development financing rather than comprehensive alliances.
- **Multialignment**: Simultaneous participation in diverse, sometimes seemingly rival multilateral forums.

Multidomain First-order Effects

Economics

India's strategic autonomy has direct economic implications. By not binding itself to the procurement practices or regulatory constraints of any one bloc, India can negotiate technology partnerships, natural resource investment and procurement deals, defense ties and trade pacts keeping its core interests at center stage. The objective is to future-proof growth amidst geopolitical and economic volatility.

India's strategic autonomy has direct economic implications. By not binding itself to the procurement practices or regulatory constraints of any one bloc, India can negotiate technology partnerships, natural resource investment and procurement deals, defense ties and trade pacts keeping its core interests at center stage. The objective is to future-proof growth amidst geopolitical and economic volatility.

For example, diversification of commodity imports into Russian energy and minerals, Middle Eastern and US gas and oil, South American rare earths and Chinese battery components, enables India to meet multiple goals. It can simultaneously control inflation, trim its current account deficit, industrialize, and take steps towards building a greener economy. Alongside, reforms in domestic sectors such as mining, oil & gas production and minerals processing improve natural resource security against the backdrop of rising global protectionism and supply chain breakdowns. According to the International Energy Agency, India will be the largest source of energy demand growth in the world by 2035.[3]

There are no energy-poor, wealthy countries and no large country has achieved developed status without industrialization. Raising the contribution made by manufacturing to

total economic output is critical for lifting living standards, raising purchasing power and shifting the consumption profile higher. All aspects of industrialization – resources, technology and capital – are focus areas of India's international multialignment.

Given India will continue to contribute nearly 20% to incremental global GDP growth,[4] for many years to come, outstripping much of the G7 combined, it is only natural that investors across the world seek to capitalize on this story. As pension systems in aging nations get strained, pension funds seek growth. Investing in US equities and bonds can take them only so far.

India remains a bright spot in the investment universe given the steady growth it can deliver. The deindustrialization of many developed economies in Europe and East Asia also encourages businesses to scope out new opportunities. These firms are onshoring production in India and partnering with local firms as part of their expansion plans. Many of these same companies benefited from China's growth over the last two decades.

Now that China is largely self-sufficient in several domains and its market is dominated by local brands, India stands out as the next big investment play. Furthermore, Free Trade Agreements create new commercial relationships which exploit both comparative and competitive advantages of India and its partners. Supporting these agreements is an understanding that the Indian economy will remain stable and deliver high compounded growth.

The economic and strategic imperatives of China and the US continue to weigh on free trade. The US faces rising debt while China's economic growth depends heavily on exports. With these deep structural imbalances afflicting the two major powers of the world today, strings are increasingly attached to trading relationships. It risks tilting the strategic balance India seeks to maintain into a potentially unfavorable condition on both the economic and security fronts. India's growth depends on building a balanced economy.

It will mean that domestic consumption should be met largely by local manufacturing, indigenous technology, and where possible, domestic natural resources. Simultaneously, the country must continue to provide a reliable stream of services and goods to the world and push for WTO reforms that ensure more equitable trading norms for developing economies.

Supply-chain resilience aligning with "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) policies to boost manufacturing and reduce dependence on foreign technologies is a pillar of strategic autonomy. This is a work in progress which often involves partnerships with several firms that are materially important to developed economies.

Both indigenous innovation and joint industrial and technology projects enable India to climb the value chain, improve human capital, generate wealth and ring fence against external shocks. For foreign investors in the India story, this stability helps guarantee stable returns. By extension, New Delhi's pursuit of strategic autonomy would deliver a net positive externality to these partners.

The rise of multiple currencies is a hallmark of emerging multipolarity. As India's trade with the world grows, the country must internationalize its currency. It improves financial stability and reduces uncertainty related to foreign currency holdings. Critics argue that such a move is a concerted attempt to undercut the international monetary system in place for the last eight decades. However, the underlying reason for currency diversification lies in India's rising share of global trade amidst high global indebtedness and materially significant risk of financial asset seizures.[5]

Europe, China, the US, Japan and India are at unique stages in their economic development. Their financial obligation profiles, or debt to GDP ratios vary, with India being the least leveraged. Their respective growth rates and domestic economic conditions are distinct. Debt pressures have resulted in significant debasement of fiat currency and volatility in prices of developed market sovereign bonds. The negative impact on India's foreign reserves is significant.

Flight to quality, including gold, investments in hard assets, and internationalization of the Indian Rupee are three means to preserving wealth, and is part of India's expression of strategic autonomy. Financial stability will depend on the country's ability to get ahead of the curve of fiat debasement.

Security

Security dimensions form a critical core of strategic autonomy. India hedges against threats across contested borders and maritime trade routes by strengthening indigenous defense capabilities and maintaining flexible international security cooperation. Russia, France, the US, Israel, Germany and several regional partners will remain important partners in India's security collaboration matrix.

Defense hardware co-development and production, military-technical joint work, and shared R&D in target areas prove financially, technologically and strategically important for all involved. By focusing on interoperability in specific domains, India resists pressure to join formal military alliances, favoring sectoral cooperation, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing without treaty-bound obligations.

Nuclear autonomy is preserved through its no-first-use doctrine, robust second-strike capabilities and abstention from external security guarantees. Altogether, India becomes a trusted partner which operates within the framework of an India-first policy that benefits its defense and technology partners. Geographic location is critical given the country's growing role as a security guarantor in the Indian Ocean Region. Deftly managing multiple international relationships expands the set of converging interests that members of traditionally competing blocs can possibly have with India.

Defense modernization – which began with large scale, often single-source imports – will increasingly depend on innovation and adoption of indigenous equipment. The notion that India will remain dependent on imports for decades to come does not fit with the adaptive nature of its strategic autonomy. The annual national defense budget will likely touch $170 billion by 2035 and $350 billion by 2045.

A growing share of this will be dedicated to

Akash Missile System, India's first fully indigenous surface-to-air missile (SAM) system on display at Republic Day parade in 2025 in New Delhi. | Piyal Bhattacharjee / AFP.

hardware, R&D and testing. To make this expenditure economically and strategically sustainable, the long-term objective is to produce all critical platforms, systems and subsystems at home, harnessing indigenous intellectual property. Deploying this hardware at scale and participating in the export market reduces costs and earns revenues.

Modernizing while also reducing dependencies is a journey on which reliable suppliers and technology partners are welcome to engage with New Delhi and capture financial opportunities for a finite period. Simultaneously, interoperability will likely remain a consistent theme that keeps international defense cooperation on a firm footing. New Delhi places special emphasis on freedom of navigation and trade for all, and through its global defense partnerships, can contribute to strengthening the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

Dual use and non-military technologies are fast becoming critical to national security. Social media platforms, space technologies, data centers, next generation communication systems, semiconductors, electronic components, AI models and quantum systems stand out as areas where India seeks to develop self-reliance in a step-by-step manner. Sovereign control over what some may term "digital supply chains" is as important as a native, full-stack hardware ecosystem that serves domestic needs.

As supply chains adjust to a push for onshoring, reshoring and friendshoring, India prioritizes international collaboration based on equitable, mutually beneficial trade and a steady increase in domestic value addition. Mirroring global trends, industrial policies naturally follow to energize both innovation and scale buildout in strategically important areas.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy under strategic autonomy balances ties. It ensures that partners appreciate both modular engagement and India's approach to building a reformed multilateral system.[6] For instance, India's non-prescriptive participation in the Quad is balanced by active roles in BRICS and SCO and supplemented by engagement in the G20 and several regional groupings.

Simultaneously, bilateral ties with several member states fine tune and optimize relationships for mutual benefit. New Delhi's diplomatic outreach will therefore grow in scope and depth as the set of deliverables widens in line with the country's economy, capabilities and expected development path. Importantly, India aims for broad international consensus for reform of global institutions.

This includes UN Security Council expansion, World Trade Organisation equity for the Global South and deeper ties across G20 countries, all in the pursuit of pluralistic multipolar restructuring. What is sometimes perceived as strategic ambiguity on contentious issues including armed conflicts between third parties is not a knee-jerk reaction to the dismissive approach that some prominent members of the international community display towards India's own security concerns.

Rather, it is about redefining diplomacy with the aim of derisking across all major domains of India's international relations. This enables New Delhi to safeguard national interests while retaining negotiating leverage. Expectedly, the diplomatic capabilities of the country will expand as the complexities of multipolarity and multialignment take on new forms.

Second Order Effects and Challenges

In the run up to the middle of the century, India will project itself as the primary net security provider and developmental partner spanning East Africa to Southeast Asia. This would provide an alternative and stable development path to what China offers through the Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to help countries in the Global South earn an opportunity to hedge, and exercise within their constraints, strategic autonomy.

This will strengthen India's neighborhood-first approach, focusing on connectivity, reviving cultural exchange and rebuilding Asian

trade routes which better reflect the growing presence of India at the crossroads between West and East Asia. Given the vast array of interests at play in the region and beyond, deft diplomacy will be required to make this sustainable. Developed nations that invest in a collaborative effort with India in financing and capacity building across the region can contribute to rule-setting and therefore, regional stability.

The path towards this goal involves navigating often strained regional and global relationships. When regional demands conflict with India's global balancing, New Delhi's diplomatic capabilities must match the moment.

On a larger level, India's approach to strategic hedging challenges global power expectations, especially Washington's desire for closer defense alignment and dependency, while also preventing Moscow and Beijing from viewing New Delhi as an unequivocal Western ally. Such hedging enables India to maximize transactional gains from competing powers, but this can lead to diplomatic friction, as demonstrated by divergent responses to the Russia-Ukraine war and regional conflicts in Asia, including the Indian subcontinent.

The solution lies in rapid development of indigenous capabilities. This reduces dependencies and fosters balanced bilateral relations. That said, the constraints here are significant. Technology innovation, capital creation and human capital development take time to mature. Meanwhile, as multialignment broadens India's export markets and foreign investment flows, persistent trade frictions with certain Western and Eastern partners pose risks for sustained economic growth. Domestic reforms covering agriculture, the bureaucracy and land can raise efficiency and productivity, thereby opening new avenues for growth.

However, political constraints may hamper reforms. As a result, foreign policy maneuverability can face serious limitations. India's push for indigenous technological capability and supply-chain independence, while a resilience strategy, might also slow high-tech sector integration absent greater external partnerships. Navigating these challenges will test New Delhi's resolve, the acumen of regional leaders at the state level, and the speed with which the bureaucracy can execute plans.

Over time, India's strategic autonomy has the potential to reshape global models of partnership, providing a template for what multilateralism can look like in a world in which the center of economic gravity shifts from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. By refusing zero-sum alignments, India may catalyze new forms of coalitional diplomacy, especially among medium powers.

The demand for democratization of global institutions and participation in setting rules for next generation technologies will intensify, leading to increased friction with status quo powers but also opportunity for collaboration with rising actors. Participation in modular, issue-based coalitions will proliferate, yet overlapping and sometimes contradictory commitments may invite criticism or doubt regarding reliability, consistency and sustainability.

The multiplicity of engagements requires agile management. The risk of overstretch is real if conflicting commitments get rival coalitions to materially pressure India for alignment. The possible denial of critical technologies, access to global banking channels, trade opportunities and trade routes, remain major concerns. Such risks would be magnified should Indian growth stall, conflicts between the West and Russia-China axis come to a head before India reaches a critical economic mass, and domestic reforms are found slow to pass.

Pursuit of regional and global hegemony by major powers has deeply damaged traditional rules of engagement, debased diplomatic protocol and eroded trust. Hedging against this by building autonomous security capacities will likely spur indigenous innovation. In the long run, this could fundamentally transform the global security architecture by placing India as a pole in a multipolar world. India's

nuclear policies, cyber defense initiatives, and space ambitions stand to enhance deterrence and strategic influence, but increased complexity in threat management, especially in technology-enabled grey-zone warfare and proxy conflicts will test New Delhi's diplomatic adaptability and precise applications of locally made systems.

An Evolving Paradigm

The intersection of technology, trade and finance will determine the constraints and opportunities for major and emerging powers. As global debt reaches unprecedented levels and nations face aging demographics, the pressure to unleash new productive forces mounts rapidly. Imbalances in trade can in part be resolved by production automation and AI.

However, access to natural resources will become a major bottleneck. As the world transforms and India grows, the contours of the country's strategic autonomy will evolve. To compound high growth from high absolute GDP levels down the line, preserving international maneuverability becomes a national imperative. That can be achieved by maximizing domestic capabilities.

Many of these can be built through relations based on the need of others to strategically hedge. Afterall, the world of "with us or against us" has passed its expiration date.[7] Special focus will be maintained on securing trade routes, co-developing production and defense technologies, accessing a reliable stream of commodities and building an internationalized currency.

Going forward, policymakers will continue to refine this doctrine, balancing autonomy with partnerships and national interest with global responsibility. The challenges are formidable – the complexity of global expectations, a wide range of internal capacity constraints and disruptive geopolitical shifts – but the logic behind strategic autonomy remains robust and central to India's growth and the world's stability.

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Surya Kanegaonkar

Surya Kanegaonkar is a commodities investor and columnist based in Zug, Switzerland. His focus areas are natural resources, international trade, geopolitics and economic security. He has formulated policy recommendations around these themes in over forty articles for media outlets including The Hindu, CNN News18, Fair Observer and India Global Business. Surya holds a MSc in Metals & Energy Finance from Imperial College London and a BSc in Economics from the University of Warwick.

THE CASE FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Amitabh Kant

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi on September 9, 2023. | PTI.

Introduction

The world today is characterised by deep uncertainty and fragmentation. Old alliances are fraying, at the very moment new conflicts are erupting; global governance is weakest precisely when cooperation is most needed. A multipolar world order is seeing the United States voluntarily cede space with its 'America First' doctrine. The institutions built in the aftermath of the Second World War, such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, are struggling to respond to the 'polycrisis' the world faces today.

Since the Industrial Revolution, technology has been the key driver of progress as technological breakthroughs, from the spinning jenny and power loom to steam engines and the railways, have fundamentally reshaped production, societies, and global power structures. Today, we are well into Industry 4.0 and looking towards Industry 5.0, with technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, semiconductors, and clean technologies changing the way we live and work. As before, control of these technologies is a geopolitical tug-of-war, with countries pouring billions of dollars into securing technological sovereignty.

Adding to these uncertainties is the looming and ominous threat of climate change. Despite the Conference of the Parties (COP) 30 in Brazil agreeing to triple climate finance levels, the world remains well short of limiting warming to 2.0 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, let alone 1.5 degrees. Yet, clean technology supply chains remain dominated by a few countries. China alone accounts for 80% of global critical minerals processing and solar cell manufacturing, and approximately 70% of battery manufacturing. Control over these technologies, and the supply chains that underpin them, threatens to jeopardise the clean energy transition.

Why India Needs Strategic Autonomy?

A decade ago, India was counted among the "Fragile Five" economies, a term referring to countries with shaky macroeconomic fundamentals. Today, India is the world's fastest-growing large economy and an oasis of stability amidst global turbulence. On the back of inclusive economic growth, advancements in digital public infrastructure, climate action, and the foregrounding of the interests of the Global South, India has re-emerged as a central actor in the global order. India is bridging the interests of the Global North and South, positioning itself as a reliable and trusted partner to both the developed and developing world.

As the world becomes more unpredictable, the need for a doctrine that preserves India's sovereign decision-making while enabling it to pursue ambitious economic and technological goals is more urgent than ever. Historically, India has always sought to maintain our autonomy in foreign relations. As a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India, along with countries such as Egypt and Yugoslavia, sought to preserve the independence and sovereignty of newly independent nations during the Cold War era.

The idea behind the NAM was not to take sides and get drawn into various blocs. Indeed, 'strategic autonomy' was embedded in the NAM. Yet, we are now taking it further. Strategic autonomy is our capacity to make decisions that advance our interests while building deep and diverse partnerships, without allowing any single nation or bloc to influence or dictate our economic, technological, or geopolitical interests.

The present global environment renders strategic autonomy not merely desirable, but essential. Strategic autonomy spans the economic, energy, technological, and geopolitical domains. Economic autonomy requires stable trade relationships, a competitive manufacturing sector, and resilient supply chains. In a world where tariffs are being

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with ministers and global semiconductor CEOs at SEMICON India 2025 on September 3, 2025. | @narendramodi/X.

weaponised and export controls are restricting trade, economic autonomy gains prominence.

Technological autonomy is equally indispensable. Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, and critical minerals now underpin national security, productivity, and global competitiveness. Building capacity in these frontier domains is essential not for isolation, but to ensure that India does not become a technological colony of the West or China.

Energy autonomy has broadened in scope, extending beyond oil to include solar cells, batteries, critical minerals, and electrolysers. Compared to being non-aligned, strategic autonomy is no longer about being unaligned. It is about freedom and the capability to craft an independent path, while collaborating globally to advance our national capability.

What Strategic Autonomy is Not

At the same time, it is essential to understand what strategic autonomy is not. First, strategic autonomy is not about isolationism. India's growth, technological progress, and global leadership all depend on international engagement. Our vision to integrate ourselves into global value chains, compete in new markets, and forge a new path for global governance will not be achieved through isolationism. Strategic autonomy is also not about neutrality.

> **During India's G20 Presidency, Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened the Voice of the Global South Summit for a reason. Our promise to the countries of the Global South was that during India's G20 Presidency, we would amplify their voice and bring their concerns to the forefront of global governance. And so, we delivered, most emphatically, with the inclusion of the African Union as the 21st Member of the G20.**

Even during climate negotiations at COP, India has consistently taken clear positions, negotiating purposefully to ensure that the developed world meets its obligations on climate finance and technology transfer. Neither is strategic autonomy an avatar of the non-aligned movement. India works closely with a range of partners, from the United States to Russia, Japan to China, and Africa to Europe. Pursuing strategic autonomy allows India to pursue these multiple relationships. At the core of strategic autonomy lies cooperation, allowing India to form effective, mutually beneficial partnerships.

Strategic autonomy has enabled India's stability. For instance, in 2022, at the height of the Russia–Ukraine war, India took independent decisions on energy security, preventing a more profound and prolonged energy price shock. This not only stabilised global markets but also helped rein in inflation massively. Similarly, our leadership in digital public infrastructure (DPI), with open source and interoperability at its core, offers an alternative to the proprietary, concentrated digital architectures of the West.

Through its G20 Presidency, India committed to sharing DPI with the developing world, advancing a vision of digital inclusion that strengthens global resilience. India's pursuit of strategic autonomy carries significance well beyond its national borders. In an era of competing technological blocs, fragmented supply chains, and climate stress, a confident and autonomous India contributes to global public goods, amplifies the voice of the Global South, and expands the range of solutions available to the world.

In this world of volatility, a country of India's size and ambition must retain the ability to pursue growth, secure technology, and navigate geopolitical fault lines on its own terms. Strategic autonomy provides the framework for doing so. Our strategic autonomy is, therefore, not a defensive posture inherited from a previous era. It is the doctrine of a confident nation that seeks to shape, rather than merely navigate, the emerging world order.

As global uncertainties deepen, from technology bifurcation and supply-chain weaponisation to climate stress and

institutional fragility, India's ability to take independent, interest-driven decisions will be central to its economic rise and geopolitical influence. Strategic autonomy enables India to remain a bridge between competing blocs, a stabilising force in a fractured world, and a credible voice for the Global South. It allows India to pursue partnerships without dependence, competition without hostility, and global integration without compromising sovereignty.

Conclusion

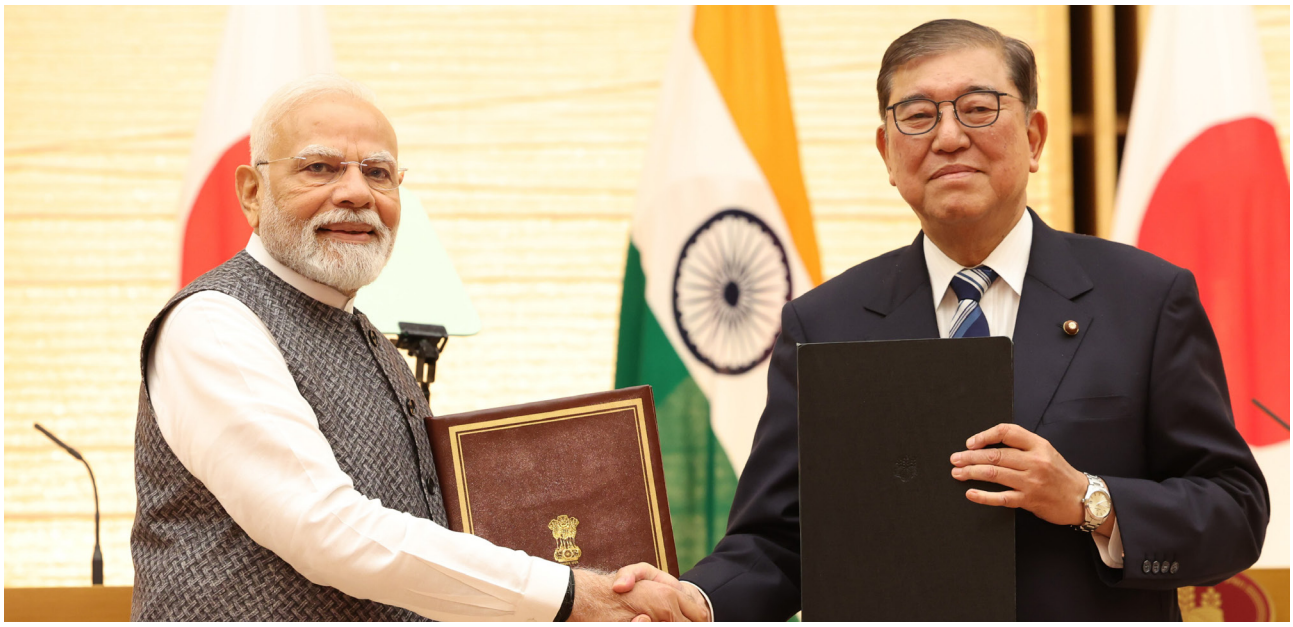
Far from being outdated, the term "strategic autonomy" captures the essence of India's contemporary foreign policy: a commitment to sovereign decision-making, global cooperation, and national capability-building. As India moves towards its long-term goal of becoming a *Viksit Bharat*, strategic autonomy must remain the bedrock of its engagement with the world.

Amitabh Kant

Amitabh Kant is Chairperson, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise. He is a former IAS officer who served as India's G20 Sherpa from 8 July 2022 till 16 June 2025 and as the chief executive officer of NITI Aayog. Kant has earlier served as Secretary, Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), Chairman & CEO, Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corporation, CMD – ITDC, Joint Secretary – Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Secretary – Tourism, Government of Kerala, Managing Director, Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation, District Collector, Kozikhode and Managing Director, Matsyafed. He is the author of the book, *Branding India – An Incredible Story*.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN PRACTICE: SUPPLY CHAINS, TECHNOLOGY, AND POWER

Ashok Malik



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Prime Minister of Japan, Shigeru Ishiba in Japan on August 30, 2025. | @ PMOIndia/X.

Introduction

The human condition craves simplicity. This is true for everyday life, and it is equally true for complex phenomena such as a nation's foreign policy. Even seasoned scholars seek to reduce it to a pithy catchphrase or short line. Often these monikers acquire a mythology of their own. Interpreting them becomes a cottage industry, engrossing strategic affairs practitioners and scholars across the globe.

Sometimes the correlation between the phrase and the desired action or policy is clear enough. For example, at a particular stage in its history, Britain practised "Splendid Isolation". This required it to work towards its domestic and distant imperial goals, while steering clear of all-consuming European politics. In the contemporary world, "America First" or "Make America Great Again" could be read as a cold-blooded attempt to safeguard the United States' military, economic and technological hierarchy, whatever the cost to the international system.

In China's case, the desire is to shape a world order that is determined by its composite national power and technological chokeholds. In parallel, it is to achieve hegemonic status in specific geographies – China's maritime neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific and its western hinterland in Eurasia. For Russia, and indeed for Turkey as well, the goal is to regain political or conceptual territory and re-

establish a sphere of influence that has been challenged by other, newer powers. This calls for a mix of revanchism and irredentism, and the use of both military depth and industrial instrumentalities. For better or worse, it also leads to Moscow's and Ankara's thinking being likened to strands of imperial grand strategy that those capitals have inherited.

Neutrality, Non-alignment, Strategic Autonomy & Multi-alignment

Where does India come in? Like the US, China and Russia, it is a continental power, with scale, internal reserves and intricate relationships with a variety of neighbours. While it has its strengths, it also has disadvantages. Arguably, India has a more challenging neighbourhood than the others. Its economic and developmental gaps, especially given the size of its population, are sharper. The expression most used currently to describe India's foreign policy doctrine is "strategic autonomy". Other names have also been used: "non-alignment" (in the past); "multi-alignment" (as if to describe an upgraded non-alignment, with a diversification of partnerships); and "neutrality" (largely for specific events).

What do these mean in the real world? The four terms are obviously different. If they were the same and meant precisely the same thing, there would be no need to agonise over them or persevere to understand individual manifestations. No doubt there is a common source code – the political imperative to win India space to optimise diplomatic relationships for its economic and developmental progress. That calibrated and orthodox set of assumptions has shaped the conduct of Indian foreign policy since independence.

> **For all the partisanship, the principles and fundamentals that influence South Block have maintained a remarkable continuity from the Nehru era to the Modi age. Indeed, the landscape the two men would have contemplated as they looked at – or look at – India's world in their respective epochs has more in common than many would have us believe.**

Yet, "neutrality" and "non-alignment" on the one hand and "strategic autonomy" and "multi-alignment" on the other certainly differ in nuance. Non-alignment was crafted in an age when India was wary of being dragged into further global conflicts. Its backdrop was two European wars in a generation that ballooned into World Wars. An additional context was the beginning of the Cold War and an emerging era of proxy hostilities promoted by the US and the Soviet Union.

No doubt the limitations of passive non-alignment, without building capabilities and all-weather security relationships, was exposed in 1962. It was a reality check and called for retooling ways and means, while recognising the validity of values and ends. Indeed, such careful, deliberate engagement with the external environment at an early juncture in a nation's history was not unique to India.

George Washington's farewell address to the American people in September 1796 was a treatise in non-alignment and strategic autonomy. It warned against "interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangl[ing] our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rival-ship, interest, humour, or caprice". It eschewed "permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world". In the early years of the Soviet Union, the ideological argument between "Permanent Revolution" and "Socialism in One Country" could be seen through a similar prism.

Was non-alignment and its episodic neutralism a product of realism or of defensiveness? It was a bit of both. It was also a recognition of India's limited stakes in far-off geographies and distant contests. From the 1990s, as a reflection of the end of the Cold War and especially given India's new economic trajectory, an evolution was required. Strategic autonomy and multi-alignment were a corollary.

There were several triggers for this. P V Narasimha Rao's Look East policy opened a long-delayed pathway to Southeast and East

Asia. This was taken to its logical iteration by Narendra Modi's ambitious and well-formed Indo-Pacific strategy. The decade from 1998 (Pokhran II) to 2008 (the Indo-US 123 Nuclear Agreement) saw a transformation in New Delhi's approach to Washington, DC. From a jammer, the nuclear issue became a force multiplier.

Notwithstanding these milestones, the principal driver was the Indian economy. In 1991, when liberalisation was inaugurated in India, its GDP was about US $275 billion, with 15 per cent (about US $40 billion) coming from external trade. Today, India's GDP is at about US $4 trillion and external trade makes up 45 per cent. Over the past 33 years, this number has grown some 15 times, but external trade has risen some 45 times. Inevitably diplomacy has had to reorganise itself. After all, a country is only as neutral and non-aligned as its trading architecture allows it to be.

Take a hypothetical example. In the 1950s or 1960s, New Delhi could sit out a civil war or conflict in a South American country, one of several that dotted the Cold War. India had very limited stakes. Today, a similar infraction could have an impact on India's energy imports, commodities and critical minerals supply chains, IT services footprint, and industrial exports.

Whereas a non-alignment or neutrality paradigm could have turned its back on the situation, a multi-alignment or strategic autonomy template would activate and deploy diversified relationships to safeguard India's equities. This is not so much a question of which policy is better, but of which policy is fit for purpose.

Trump and India's Strategic Autonomy

> **How does India fine-tune its strategic autonomy in the Trumpian age? Three determinants matter here: geography; supply chains; and technology. Strategic autonomy in building a secure and non-threatening near-neighbourhood, strategic autonomy in supply chains, and strategic autonomy in technology choices are imperatives. This would be so even if some of the specific choices – in technology for instance – in effect mean no choice at all because the only option is not acceptable. Strategic autonomy is not simply choosing differently; it is the right to decide to choose or not choose differently.**

Strategic autonomy is a transaction. It is not a gift granted by a munificent interlocutor or a demand insisted upon by an upstanding nation. Absent hard capacities and capabilities, those extremes would amount to wishful thinking and rhetorical flourish. Strategic autonomy does not push for non-engagement. Rather, leverage can be best gained by purposeful engagement. Strategic autonomy enables deterrence. As such strategic autonomy strives to create an intricate patchwork of dependencies: mutual dependencies, inward dependencies and outward dependencies. At its essence, strategic autonomy works best when one has leverage.

The US has leverage over China because it controls supply of high-end chips. China has leverage over the US because it controls supply of rare earths and is an irreplaceable market for sorghum and soybean farmers. Even in a testy, competitive relationship, this gives both sides leverage and strategic room or autonomy. While not reducing trust, it raises the cost of non-trust.

There are lessons here for India. This is an age when a cyberattack on critical economic infrastructure is a more proximate threat than a nuclear strike by a state actor. India's strategic autonomy, therefore, needs to be built by its supply chains and technology arrangements, not by the limited logic of political preferences. Consider six vectors.

Lessons for India

- ❖ India must strive to matter to the greatest possible number of countries as either a critical supplier or a significant buyer of a specific commodity, service or product category for the other country. This will

require creating industrial capacities but also necessitate a liberal market-access strategy for individual partners and business areas. Like certain others, India needs to instrumentalise market access – not by blind access-denial but by pragmatic market facilitation. This will enhance dependencies.

- At a strategic level, India needs to diversify markets beyond the US – for those export categories over-reliant on US customers – and diversify sourcing of intermediaries and components beyond China. The latter will entail making at home as well as finding other sources to cultivate. India could even consider making Chinese imports in some categories so significant that their displacement poses a risk to China itself. In the mid-19th century, the setting up of Indian textile mills by entrepreneurs such as Jamsetji Tata was opposed by the British textile industry but supported by British textile machinery manufacturers. Both lobbied the government in London with opposite petitions.
- The West facilitated manufacturing in China. China has no intention of doing the same in India. Even so, China covets the Indian market. There needs to be a trenchant identification of industrial sectors where market access is deemed permissible as a price for greater Chinese investments in local value-addition facilities and capacities. This should not be an across-the-board thrust, but a limited compromise, after a careful determination and with a whole-of-government clarity.
- Both the European Union and the ASEAN bloc are trapped between a coarsening US and an intimidating China. An opportunity exists for India beyond schadenfreude. Both those collectives are looking to India to expand their strategic autonomy. There is no reason why India cannot use them judiciously for the same purpose. Again trade, market access and supply chain interlinkages – including defence supply chain interlinkages – will play a role and will call for enlightened policy framing.
- As India builds its manufacturing, it will need steady commodities supply relationships with several countries: Australia and Indonesia to its east, Russia to its north, South American nations such as Peru and Chile, even Canada and parts of Europe. It will also need to focus on industries where opportunities are available and where it (India) has demonstrated ability. Refining of crude oil is one such strength. India's expertise,

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in New Delhi on January 19, 2026. | Indian Economic Observer.

price advantages and potential market stranglehold can make it possible to refining what Taiwan is to semiconductors. Strategic autonomy here requires not being bullied into which relationships to go ahead with and which to abstain from. It could also mean countering gaslighting in the form of stiff energy transition targets that nobody – not even Europe – can seriously meet.

- In key technologies – AI, quantum computing, the semiconductor ecosystem – India's comfort and congruence is with the West and specifically with US partners. If preserving these relationships and sequestering them from political pressures entails market-access concessions towards Washington's trade negotiators, it's a bargain well worth it. It will more than pay for itself in the long run.

Conclusion

These six vectors describe India's best-case scenario: growing strategic autonomy using a mechanism crafted by a nuanced exercise of strategic autonomy itself. Can India do it? Frankly, there is no choice in the matter. It must and it will. It would help of course if diplomacy were allowed to once more become the quiet, gritty, even boring calling it needs to be. Strategic autonomy is a long game, and Indian statecraft needs to accord the game that respect.

Ashok Malik

Ashok Malik is a Partner at The Asia Group and Chair of its New Delhi-based subsidiary in India where he leads the firm's in-market business strategy and services. Drawing on over 30 years of experience in government, media, and thought leadership, he is a recognized specialist on India's policy landscape and the intersection of business and politics. His areas of expertise include India's foreign and trade policies and the government's approach to international business, resilient supply chains and national capacities. He is a former policy advisor/additional secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, having served in that position from October 2019 to August 2022.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

V K Saraswat

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen here along with other world leaders in Paris where he co-chaired the AI Action Summit on February 11, 2025. | MEA.

Introduction

Strategic autonomy traditionally is the ability of a nation to make independent decisions in areas such as security, economy, technology and diplomacy, free from undue external influence. However, in the 21st century, this concept is being modified by the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI has become a foundational layer of national power that has the ability to influence military effectiveness, economic strength, governance capacity and societal resilience.

As a result, strategic autonomy in the age of AI extends beyond traditional priorities such as territorial defence and energy security. It now includes critical issues like data sovereignty, control over algorithms, access to computing infrastructures and the development of skilled human capital.

Why AI Matters for National Power?

AI functions as a general-purpose technology that has strategic implications comparable to those of energy or the internet. Its application extends to intelligence analysis, defence systems, logistics, cyber operations, public administration, finance, and healthcare. Nations that control AI ecosystems gain significant asymmetric advantages, including predictive governance, faster decision-making cycles, enhanced situational awareness, and the ability to scale innovation efficiently.

Unlike conventional military or industrial assets, AI capabilities are cumulative and dependent on the implementation process. Early advantages in areas such as cloud infrastructure, data collection, semiconductor manufacturing, and talent development

tend to reinforce themselves over time. This concentration of AI capabilities within a few countries and corporations impacts technological dependence, strategic vulnerability, and the gradual reduction of sovereign decision-making capability for others.

Impact of Foreign-owned Data and Algorithms

> **In the era of AI, data has emerged as a strategic resource. Control over national data, whether civilian, industrial, or defence-related, now has a direct bearing on a state's ability to act autonomously. Dependence on foreign digital platforms, cloud providers, and proprietary algorithms can compromise sensitive information, shape policy choices and create hidden channels of influence.**

Dependence on algorithms is particularly problematic. When critical national functions, such as satellite imagery analysis, border control, battlefield decision-support tools, or financial systems, rely on algorithms owned and controlled by foreign entities, strategic autonomy can be easily compromised. Thus, achieving true autonomy today requires more than mere data ownership. It demands transparency, auditability and meaningful control over the AI systems that process and act upon that data.

Control of Decision-Making in Military AI

Use of AI in the military domain poses significant challenges. Technologies such as autonomous weapons systems, predictive logistics, decision-support tools, and AI-enabled command-and-control significantly impact the surveillance and action & reaction process in military ecosystems. While this can enhance operational effectiveness, it also carries the risk of transferring critical judgement to machines that might have been trained on incomplete, biased, or context-insensitive data.

Reliance on externally developed AI models for targeting, threat assessment, or escalation management could adversely affect the process of independent military decision-making. Therefore, the indigenous development of military AI systems that are tested, validated, and governed in accordance with national doctrines, values, and threat perceptions is of utmost importance.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at the 14th edition of Aero India 2023, in Bengaluru, on February 13, 2023. | PTI.

AI in Economic Growth

Increase in productivity due to the application of AI is reshaping global value chains and redefining patterns of economic competitiveness. Countries that lack domestic AI capabilities face the risk of deindustrialization, technological subordination, and labour displacement without compensation. Achieving autonomy depends on several critical foundations:

- Secure access to semiconductors and high-performance computing (HPC) systems
- A skilled workforce with expertise in developing, deploying and regulating AI
- Indigenous AI research
- AI-enabled Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sectors

Without these capabilities, reliance on foreign AI tools for functions such as design, quality control, and predictive maintenance can shift competitive advantage overseas, gradually eroding long-term economic control.

Democratic Processes, Effective Governance & Security

> **AI systems are playing an increasingly influential role in shaping public opinions, electoral outcomes and citizen behaviour through recommender systems and tailored media. As a result, strategic autonomy now also encompasses the capacity of a society to form opinions and make collective decisions independent of biased algorithms and information distortion.**

Foreign-controlled AI platforms can shape narratives, amplify social divisions and erode trust in institutions. A truly strong democratic governance in this era depends on stringent regulatory management, widespread digital literacy and sovereign oversight of AI systems with high societal impact.

Autonomy & Interdependence

Strategic autonomy does not mean technological isolation. Development of AI thrives on collaboration, open science and free movement of global talent. The challenge lies in striking the right balance between openness and control, and between international cooperation and national resilience.

Emerging economies should aim for selective autonomy; building sovereign capabilities while actively engaging in international partnerships. Multilateral frameworks for AI governance, norms for military AI, and diversified supply chains can strengthen a nation without distorting the global innovation ecosystem.

The Indian Perspective

The journey of India towards achieving *Atmanirbharta* in the era of AI reflects a more practical approach based on a blend of indigenous development, openness and institutional innovation.

One of the most distinctive contributions of India lies in its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI, and DigiLocker and the India Stack, which have created interoperable, large-scale digital frameworks that generate trusted data flows within sovereign oversight. This architecture promotes AI innovation, enables the development of social applications such as health, welfare delivery, and fintech as well as reduces dependence on foreign digital technologies.

In the defence and national security domain, India has launched indigenous AI programmes through R&D organisations, startups and academic institutions. These programmes focus on areas such as surveillance, intelligence analysis, logistics optimisation and decision-support systems. Policy initiatives like the National AI Strategy, along with recent efforts to promote domestic semiconductor manufacturing demonstrate that AI autonomy requires control over both software and hardware components.

India should strategically draw selective lessons from global pioneers. From the United States, we can learn the importance of private-

sector innovation, strong academia–industry interaction, and frontier research. From China, we can study the value of long-term planning and commonality between civilian and strategic AI capabilities. From Europe, we can borrow an emphasis on ethical, transparent and accountable AI governance. At the same time, India should recognise the utility of selective autonomy, focusing on high-impact domains rather than attempting technological dominance.

The future of AI in India will depend on strengthening indigenous translational research, setting up compute and semiconductors infrastructure, integrating civil–military AI ecosystems, and investing in human capital. Eventually, the Indian objective should not be technological isolation but freedom of strategic choice to achieve AI-enhanced national capability without constraining sovereign decision-making.

Conclusion

> **In the age of AI, control of borders, military strength, and adequacy of natural resources are not the only parameters for strategic autonomy. It is determined by control over data and algorithms, computing infrastructure like data centers and the human skills to govern complex machine systems.**

In a world increasingly shaped by intelligent machines, nations that fail to secure these foundations risk becoming followers and always remain in chase-mode. True strategic autonomy in the AI era does not lie in resisting technological change, but in mastering it: aligning AI development with national ethos and long-term strategic objectives. The choices made today will determine whether AI becomes an instrument of empowerment or a source of dependence.

(This article is based on the keynote address delivered by the author at the Conference "India's AI Gambit: Navigating the Global Race" organised by NatStrat in January 2026 in New Delhi)

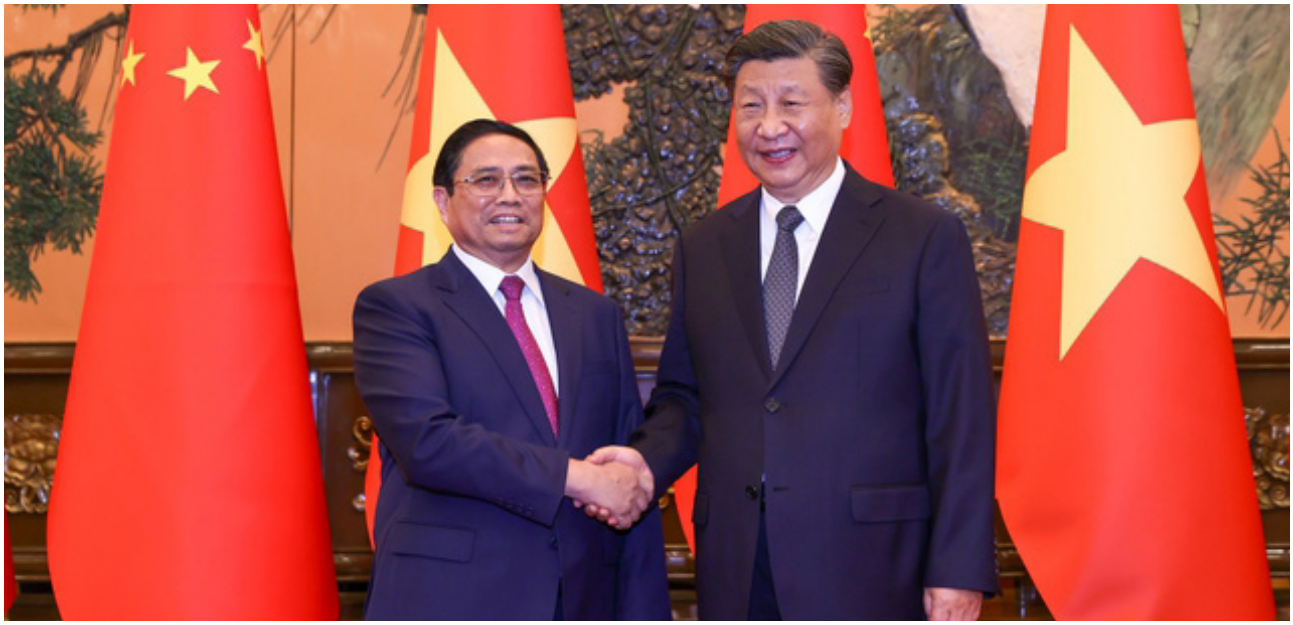
Vijay Kumar Saraswat

Vijay Kumar Saraswat is Member, NITI Aayog and former Chancellor, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is a distinguished scientist with vast experience in defence research—in both basic and applied sciences—spanning several decades. He retired as Secretary, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), after decades of government service. Dr Saraswat has had an illustrious career and is credited with the indigenous development of missiles such as *Prithvi*, *Dhanush*, *Prahaar*, and *Agni-5;* the two-tiered Ballistic Missile Defence system; the initial operational clearance of Light Combat Aircraft *Tejas;* and nuclear submarine *INS Arihant*.

Case Studies

HEDGING WITHOUT PUNISHMENT: VIETNAM, INDIA, AND THE UNEQUAL BURDEN OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Swati Arun



Prime Minister of Vietnam, Phạm Minh Chính (left) meets President of China Xi Jinping in Beijing on June 27, 2023. | VGP.

Introduction

The international order is undergoing a profound, if quiet, transformation as the unipolar moment of American preponderance gives way to a fragmented multipolar system. At the core of this shift lies China's rise and the intensifying great-power competition between the United States and China. Yet this structural contest has also enabled Russia's renewed revisionism and exposed deep political and strategic fractures within the Western world, further aggravated by Washington's growing unpredictability. Together, these dynamics have eroded the security assurances that once flowed from established partnerships, compelling states to seek alternative hedging strategies without overtly destabilizing the existing balance of power. In such an environment, strategic foresight, resilience, and a calibrated form of strategic autonomy have become essential for states seeking not merely to survive between two competing poles but to operate effectively within their shadow.

Two prominent examples of functional strategic autonomy are India and Vietnam. Yet despite their broadly similar multi-alignment instincts, the two countries elicit strikingly different responses to the exercise of this strategy as a

long-term bulwark against great-power rivalry. This divergence makes it especially important to examine how Vietnam has navigated its dense and often contradictory network of external partnerships with relative success, even as India confronts growing contestation and constraints in pursuing a comparable path.

Strategic Autonomy as Process, Not Posture

> **"Strategic autonomy" is one of the most invoked and misunderstood concepts in contemporary foreign policy debates. It is often understood as a posture of equidistance, i.e. having multiple partners while avoiding formal alliances and preserving independent decision-making. Critics argue that managing too many contradictory partnerships may lead to discontent over alignment choices, while proponents promote the fluidity it allows.**

The term, however, is better understood as a process rather than an end state. At its core, it implies:

- Independent decision-making, free from external compulsion.
- Diversified partnerships across competing power centres.
- Capability accumulation, which strengthens bargaining power and reduces vulnerability.

Autonomy, here, is not a posture of withdrawal or neutrality but of *choice anchored in capacity*. It occupies the middle ground between rigid bloc politics and passive neutrality. The success of this delicate balancing act depends on astute diplomacy, systematic resilience and a clear long-term goal to pursue.

Strategic autonomy is therefore not an easy choice, especially in the current world order. Mishandled, it can leave a state politically exposed and strategically isolated. Its successful execution demands foresight, diplomatic finesse and agility in managing partners at crossroads with one another.

Vietnam's Strategic Hedging

It is not the first time that Vietnam has found itself wedged between great powers, balancing and navigating. It remains one of the few countries in modern history to have fought both the United States and China.

During the Cold War, Vietnam aligned itself closely with the Soviet Union, which progressively worsened its relations with China and ultimately led to the invasion of 1979. Yet China was not always an adversary. It aided[1] Ho Chi Minh's 1954 war of independence against the French by supplying arms. The support deepened in 1964, when China provided both troops and economic support to North Vietnam in its war against the United States.

The 1979 Chinese invasion was driven explicitly by geopolitical calculations. By then, China had normalized relations with the United States in 1971, while Vietnam invaded Cambodia, overthrowing the China-backed Pol Pot regime. The invasion thus served as a blunt reminder that Vietnam's geographical constraints would stymie its ideological connections.

Simply put, China sought to impose control over its smaller neighbor, Vietnam, an impulse captured in Deng Xiaoping's remarks[2] to then US President Jimmy Carter, "When a child misbehaves, he needs a spanking." Through this war, China simultaneously appeased the US, scored a political victory over the Soviet Union, and taught a bloody lesson to Vietnam. For Hanoi, it was clear that it was expendable in the great power game. Vietnam thereafter pursued a very careful approach to great power politics.

Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy rests on three pillars: the *Four No's*, bamboo diplomacy and ASEAN centrality. The Four No's commit Vietnam to no military alliances, no foreign intervention, no foreign military bases, and no intervention in other countries. The Bamboo diplomacy dictates[3] that, 'like a bamboo,

Vietnam should glide along with changing "winds" and adapt pragmatically to shifting regional and international "gusts" without breaking, and remain resilient.' Together, these principles enable a multi-vector alignment that sustains close relations simultaneously with competing powers like China, Russia and the United States. Complementing this, Vietnam's adverse security environment pushed it to promote collective security under a united ASEAN, prioritizing ASEAN centrality in the regional matters.

From Rhetorical to Active Hedging

The success of Vietnam's strategic autonomy is evident in its growing diversification of defence partnerships beyond the traditional supplier Russia,[4] to include Israel,[5] South Korea,[6] India,[7] the US,[8] Japan,[9] and European nations (France,[10] Netherlands[11]). Hanoi has leveraged these partnerships, particularly to strengthen naval capacity, and upgrade defence technology and enhance maritime surveillance. These efforts accelerated after the United States lifted its arms embargo in 2016 and signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023.

Vietnam's hedging strategy against the Chinese expansion is most clearly reflected in its acquisition of coastal and maritime security assets. These include Russian submarines (Kilo-class) with Klub missiles, Gepard frigates, and Svetlyak patrol crafts; Pohang corvettes from South Korea; as well as coast guard cutters, drones, and patrol boats, sourced from multiple partners. In parallel, Vietnam has also undertaken extensive island reclamation and fortification activities in the disputed Spratly Islands. To date, it has militarised[12] 21 islands and is on track to surpass[13] China.

Simultaneously, Vietnam has deployed a broad array of institutional, economic and legal instruments to expand its strategic flexibility:

- Independent decision-making, free from external compulsion. Free Trade Agreements and Regional Economic Partnerships– the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, 2018), EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (August 2020); Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, 2022), embedded Vietnam in regional supply chains and economic flows.
- Domestic legal measures like the Cybersecurity Law,[14] 2018 and maritime-domain laws like the Law on Vietnam Coast Guard, 2019,[15] strengthened regulatory control, digital sovereignty and maritime governance.

Vietnam's foreign policy of "too many friends"

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (left), President of the US, Donald Trump and President of China, Xi Jinping. | ORF.

has not left it isolated. On the contrary, its calibrated diversification has been designed to *build capacity, enhance resilience, and raise the cost of coercion*, especially from powerful neighbors. These carefully crafted strategic tools marked a major shift in Hanoi's external posture: from rhetorical hedging to active hedging through tangible political, military, economic and legal instruments.

Indian Strategic Autonomy: Continuity and Contestation

Indian foreign policy tradition has long reflected a commitment to strategic self-reliance, from the historical non-alignment to the current framework of "multi-alignment." Across this trajectory, India has consistently asserted its right to pursue national interests independently rather than through formal alliances. India's political leadership frequently articulates this logic. Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared,[16] "India's time has come... We will engage with all nations on the basis of mutual respect and mutual benefit." Similarly, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar underscored this notion by stating,[17] "India will do what is in India's interests. Others must also understand that the era of single pole is over." Together, these statements reflect India's self-perception as an autonomous actor in a transitioning global order.

Yet the assertion of strategic autonomy has also carried tangible political costs for India. Indian political choices, rooted in sovereign calculation and national interest, have increasingly drawn criticism and pressure, particularly from Western partners. This contrasts sharply with the reception given to Vietnam, which is lauded for its precise and disciplined "bamboo diplomacy." Hanoi has maintained close and parallel partnerships with China, the United States, Russia, India and Japan, without criticism.

A useful way of understanding this asymmetry lies in the hierarchical logic of the international system. As an emerging great power, India attracts far greater strategic scrutiny and expectation. Its actions are interpreted not merely as a function of independent foreign policy, but as signals with systemic consequences for the balance of power. Smaller and middle powers such as Vietnam, by contrast, are granted greater latitude to maneuver precisely because they are not viewed as potential architects of the international order. Consequently, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is often judged through the lens of alignment politics, while Vietnam's is viewed as pragmatic statecraft.

Structural Asymmetry: Why Vietnam Is Praised, and India Is Pressured

Both Vietnam and India face the shared challenge of navigating an increasingly complex and competitive international order. Yet their global positions, capacities and ambitions could not be more different. Vietnam does not seek a great power status, nor does it aspire to regional hegemony. Its long-term strategy rests on a unified ASEAN, emphasizing economic development and collective security.

India, by contrast, is the world's fourth-largest economy and military, carrying both great power ambitions and structural potential. India and China face a structural dilemma, where any strategic gain by India is a loss for China and vice versa. For the West, India is a regional bulwark against Chinese expansionism, an alternative market and a like-minded democracy with shared strategic interests. India was seen as a demographic, economic and military giant in waiting. Over the last decade and a half, India has been courted[18] by all major powers, enjoying a period of deep engagement with Russia, the United States, China and Europe, participating in both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and QUAD.

In recent months, however, India's geopolitical latitude has been increasingly constrained. It has found itself navigating pressures from the

United States (and the West), China and Russia. The loss in India's geopolitical "sweet spot"[19] is evident in multiple developments: punitive actions by the Trump Administration over India's energy and military ties with Russia, China's lingering insensitivity of various Indian security concerns and Russia's diminished attention to India's external challenges, due to its own conflicts.

India's strategic importance to the United States stemmed from its capacity to contain China, which explains Washington's robust promotion of India as a net security provider in the early 2000s. Cultivating close ties with New Delhi was critical for maintaining the regional balance of power, and implicit in this engagement was the expectation that India would align closer to Washington. Yet, China's rapid economic and military development reshaped global priorities, compelling both the US and Russia to prioritize immediate rewards from the Chinese growth machine.

A further inflexion point emerged following India's assertive stance on strategic autonomy regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, seen as *defiance rather than pragmatism*. This signaled to Washington that India would not abandon its independent foreign policy and was unlikely to ever treat the US as an exclusive partner. In response,[20] US-India relations have increasingly assumed a transactional character.

Meanwhile, China's belligerent actions along the LAC in 2020, combined with its support for Pakistan in the May 2025 conflict with India, have further challenged the outlook for India as a "net security provider" in the region. The diplomatic, military and economic asymmetries between the two Asian giants have persuaded Beijing that relations should be seen from a realpolitik lens where hierarchy should be established congruent with relative power.

While Vietnam leverages ASEAN to diffuse tension and risks, India operates largely alone as a continental and maritime power. Moreover, India's limited ability to translate diplomatic posture into sustained capability accumulation has remained uneven. This weakens the material foundation of its autonomy. Therefore, India's policy space is narrowing not because its doctrine is flawed, but because its structural position generates expectations that its material power has not yet fully matched.

Conclusion

Strategic autonomy in contemporary international order is not judged by conceptual purity but by structural position. Vietnam and India both practice multi-alignment, yet their experiences reveal how hierarchy, power expectations, and capability asymmetries shape the success or constraint of autonomous strategies. Vietnam's autonomy is stabilized by its limited systemic ambitions, ASEAN embeddedness, and disciplined hedging, allowing flexibility without provoking alignment demands. India's autonomy, by contrast, unfolds under the burden of great-power expectation, unresolved power transitions, and shrinking tolerance for strategic ambiguity. The divergence between the two thus reflects not failure of doctrine, but the unequal pressures imposed by a fractured and competitive multipolar order.

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Swati Arun

Swati Arun holds a PhD in China Studies and is a China specialist focusing on US-China relations, Indo-Pacific security, and great-power competition. In her previous roles as Consultant, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, and as a Visiting Fellow in Taiwan, Dr Arun has engaged closely with all relevant stakeholders contributing to policy research, strategic dialogues, and high-level discussions on India's foreign, security, and China policies.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: A CASE STUDY OF INDIA'S BRICS MEMBERSHIP

Raj Kumar Sharma

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva at the Museum of Modern Art to participate in BRICS Summit, in Brazil on July 6, 2025. | News Arena India.

Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism

After successfully hosting the 2023 G20 Summit, India has assumed the presidency of another important multilateral institution, BRICS, in 2026 for the fourth time, having previously hosted the BRICS summits in 2012, 2016, and 2021. Multilateralism has been a key feature of India's foreign policy, through which New Delhi seeks to balance its national interests with its global commitments as a responsible rising power.

There have been three distinct phases in the evolution of multilateralism in India's foreign policy. The first phase (1947–61) was marked by universalism, idealism, and morality. In the second phase (1961–91), India opted for the creation of parallel institutions to the UN, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the G-77. The third phase began with the end of the Cold War in 1991, during which India embraced organisations such as the G20, BRICS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), reflecting the onset of multi-alignment in India's foreign policy.[1]

This evolution also highlights India's desire, as an emerging power, to exert its influence at the multilateral level, in contrast to newly independent India, whose multilateral strategy was more defensive in nature.[2] India's strategic autonomy is deeply embedded in its policy of multilateralism as it enables India to participate simultaneously in diverse multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Quad, primarily to

safeguard its national interest without getting entangled in alliance commitments. This approach helps India enhance its strategic autonomy by building flexible, interest-based coalitions. Thus, multilateralism becomes a tool to preserve and expand India's strategic autonomy. At the same time, multilateralism provides India with an opportunity to foreground issues that are important for the Global South. India's Global South identity provides moral foundation and legitimacy to its strategic autonomy[3] and both are mutually reinforcing.

Compared to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the other international institution where India and China are members, BRICS is better positioned to promote India's strategic autonomy. SCO has a narrow agenda, mainly focused on security issues and is regional in its approach. In comparison, BRICS is global in outlook with a wider agenda including issues of the Global South and reform of global institutions. Power is more diffused within the BRICS unlike the SCO where China's influence is more pronounced due to lack of members which can balance Beijing. Hence, BRICS facilitates better flexibility and strategic autonomy for India.

Non-Alignment, Multi-alignment and the Emergence of BRICS

Both the Non-Aligned Movement and BRICS are examples of multilateral groupings in which India has been a founding member; however, there are key differences between the two. The Non-Aligned Movement was primarily about navigating Cold War geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union, at a time when newly independent India lacked the capacity to influence global events.

In contrast, through BRICS, a rising and confident India, in concert with other major powers, seeks to shape the agenda of global governance. The presence of two veto-wielding countries—Russia and China—within BRICS gives the grouping greater leverage in global governance matters, unlike the Non-Aligned Movement, which consisted largely of newly independent states.

> **In addition, non-alignment was influenced significantly by ideology, whereas in BRICS, it is shared interests among member states that bind the grouping together. It is also pertinent to note that BRICS membership allows India to de-hyphenate itself from the India–Pakistan binary, projecting India as a responsible global power with interests extending beyond South Asia.**

Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval (2nd from right, sitting) with other BRICS National Security Advisors in Johannesburg, South Africa, on July 24, 2023. | PTI.

When BRICS was established in 2010 (BRIC was formed in 2009 which became BRICS after South Africa joined in 2010) coincided with an early phase of India–US strategic convergence. As highlighted by Ambassador Shyam Saran in this edition, it was important to convey that India would not align with the United States on all issues. The Left parties argued that India would risk losing its strategic autonomy due to the India–US civil nuclear deal.[4] In response, the Indian government clarified that India would not compromise its decision-making independence and would continue to uphold its strategic autonomy.[5]

It was in this context that India articulated the policy of multi-alignment, a strategy aimed at forging and managing shifting coalitions of interests, requiring skilful handling of complex relationships and emerging opportunities. Multi-alignment addresses India's dilemma of reconciling strategic autonomy with closer engagement with major powers.[6] For India, the objective has been to leverage relationships with rival blocs and diverse groups of countries to advance its national interest.

As the India–US nuclear deal marked the beginning of closer strategic and economic ties between India and the West, New Delhi's continued participation in BRICS signalled its intent to maintain parallel relationships with non-Western countries, thereby safeguarding and strengthening its strategic autonomy.

BRICS and India's Strategic Autonomy

BRICS expands India's institutional, economic, and diplomatic options in an increasingly uncertain global order and, in doing so, reinforces India's strategic autonomy.

- **Global Governance Reform**: BRICS provides a platform through which India advocates reforms of global governance institutions, including the UN Security Council (UNSC), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). There are internal divisions within BRICS members over the issue of UNSC reform which prevents decisive action in this regard. However, for India, BRICS membership helps to keep the UNSC reform on global agenda, mobilise international support and shape global opinion. A permanent seat on the UNSC would significantly strengthen India's strategic autonomy by enhancing its voice in global decision-making and foreign policy independence.

- **Non-Western Identity**: BRICS underscores India's identity as a 'non-Western' rather than an 'anti-Western' power. This distinction reflects India's desire to maintain constructive relations with the West, with BRICS serving as a platform for cooperation rather than confrontation. India has consistently resisted unnecessary anti-West rhetoric within BRICS, emphasising that the grouping is not a formal alliance but an informal and flexible arrangement. This flexibility allows India to balance relationships across geopolitical divides without formal alignment, thereby preserving its strategic autonomy.[7] Even during BRICS expansion, India has remained cautious that the grouping should not evolve into an anti-West platform dominated by China[8]; as such an outcome would constrain India's flexibility and freedom of action.

- **Alternative Financing Mechanism**: The New Development Bank (NDB), proposed under the BRICS framework, serves as an alternative financing mechanism for India's sustainable development and infrastructure needs. The NDB has approved loans worth approximately US$10 billion for 28 major infrastructure projects in India, including Namo Bharat high-speed trains, metro rail projects in Mumbai, Indore, and Chennai, and the Delhi–Ghaziabad–Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System.[9] Unlike loans from Western-dominated institutions such as the WB and IMF, NDB financing does not carry stringent conditionalities, thereby expanding India's economic autonomy and bargaining power.

- **Facilitates Multi-alignment**: BRICS aligns well with India's multi-alignment strategy by enabling engagement with major non-Western powers, including Russia, China, South Africa, and Brazil, as well as newer members such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Iran. Simultaneously, India sustains strong ties with the West through platforms

like the Quad, G20, and G7 outreach mechanisms. This approach facilitates strategic diversification without excessive dependence on any single partner.

- **Normative Influence**: BRICS enhances India's agenda-setting capacity and normative influence, allowing New Delhi to shape debates on global governance reform, digital public infrastructure, and the priorities of the Global South. This positions India as a rule-shaper rather than a passive rule-taker. Despite the fact that Russia and China would want to shape BRICS into a geopolitical rival to the West, India has consistently sought to align the BRICS agenda with Global South priorities. This reflects India's strategic autonomy in BRICS despite great power pressure. Here, India is able to cast itself as a bridge between the West and the East and aligns its strategic autonomy with the global responsibility to ensure that the interests of the Global South are protected.

- **Independent Engagement with China and Russia**: India's engagement with both China and Russia through BRICS exemplifies its strategic autonomy. Despite ongoing tensions with China, New Delhi still maintains a working relationship with Beijing. India remains comfortable utilising NDB-funded infrastructure projects, even as China plays a significant role in the institution.[10] A similar approach is evident in India's engagement with Russia: while India has neither condemned nor supported Russia's actions in Ukraine, it has consistently emphasised dialogue and diplomacy. At the 2024 Kazan BRICS Summit, India reiterated its position in favour of peaceful resolution rather than war.

Conclusion

The US was always critical of BRICS, however, its hostility towards the group has acquired a new edge with US President Donald Trump threatening BRICS countries with a hundred percent tariff if they take steps towards de-dollarisation. This is despite the fact that the biggest expansion of BRICS took place just a year before he was sworn in. Regardless of this, India is going ahead with preparations to host the next BRICS Summit in India in 2026. Trump's threats are unlikely to put a stop to BRICS's activities or its continuation as a grouping, but they will make many of its members more cautious about moving away from the dollar. As far as India is concerned, it is not an advocate of de-dollarisation, unlike Russia or China. India has also been quite clear that BRICS is not a political, let alone military bloc against the United States. It has major stakes in preserving its ties with the US and will not jeopardise them for gains that are less than certain.

> **India has taken over the BRICS Chairship in 2026. In the words of India's External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, BRICS has "evolved into a significant platform for cooperation among emerging markets and developing economies." India approaches its BRICS Chairship with a 'humanity first' and a 'people-centric' approach. India's theme - "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability"- underscores the importance of strengthening capacities, promoting innovation, and ensuring sustainable development for the benefit of all".**

BRICS enables India to engage with major non-Western powers without entering into formal alliances. By maintaining a non-Western rather than an anti-Western posture within BRICS, India is able to simultaneously deepen partnerships with Western countries while adhering to its policy of multi-alignment. Its broader strategic challenges with China impose limits to how much cooperation is possible within the BRICS framework. Despite the many contradictions, BRICS will continue to be a vital element of India's foreign policy and exercise of strategic autonomy. It is in that sense a good example of India balancing its different relationships as it emerges as a power in the coming years.

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Raj Kumar Sharma

Raj Kumar Sharma holds a PhD in Russian and Central Asian Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University and is a Senior Research Fellow at NatStrat where his research focuses on developments in Eurasia, Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Arctic. He has authored more than 100 articles and regularly speaks at conferences in India and abroad. He was an international observer at Uzbekistan's parliamentary elections in 2024.

Attribution: Author. Article Title. In Pankaj Saran & Raj Kumar Sharma (eds) India's Strategic Autonomy: A Special Feature, January 2026, NatStrat.

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D-319, Defence Colony
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Design & Layout: General Street Marketing Pvt Ltd

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India's Strategic Autonomy: A Special Feature | January 2026