



The Era of Strategic Multi-Alignment:

Can India Sustain Autonomy Amid Competing Power Blocs?

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Issue Brief

The Era of Strategic Multi-Alignment: Can India Sustain Autonomy Amid Competing Power Blocs?

II INTRODUCTION

India's challenge today is not a matter of choosing sides, but rather, how long it can manage not making a choice. For several decades after independence, the foreign policy of India was largely influenced by the principle of non-alignment, which meant that India did not align itself formally with any bloc, kept its strategic autonomy, and was a moral leader of the Global South (Mohan, 2003). However, the 21st century came with a drastically different world: the rise of China, the disintegration of the U.S.-led order, the intensification of great power competition, and new security and economic issues such as supply chain fragility, maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific, and technology-geopolitics. India's foreign policy is still quite a risky endeavour as it tries to keep a balance between Washington and Moscow, Beijing and Tel Aviv, without collapsing. India has shifted from Cold War era non-alignment to a more pragmatic form of multi-alignment designed to protect strategic autonomy while engaging multiple power centres, creating partnerships across groupings, but at the same time, trying to keep its own independent decision-making intact.

This article will evaluate the transition that happened. India has to keep real strategic autonomy when she is involved in formations such as Quad, BRICS+, and 12U2, which can even be at a different angle in a world of a rising China and changing balance of powers. The article begins with the concepts (strategic autonomy; asymmetric interdependence), then looks at the examples of India's involvement in the largest multilateral/minilateral groupings, and at last, discusses the policy impacts.

II CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO MULTI-ALIGNMENT

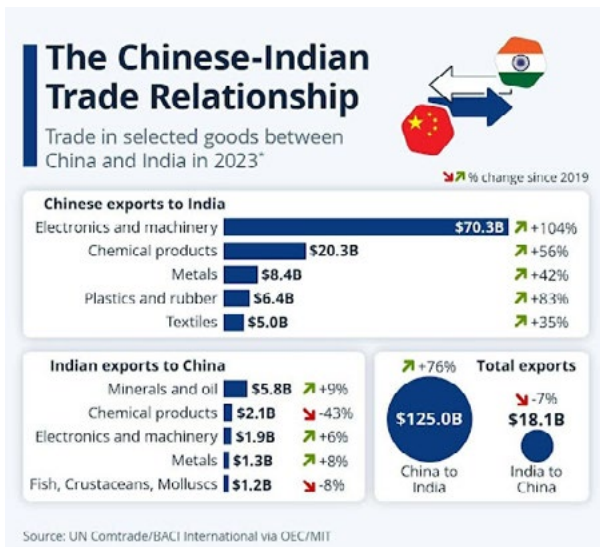
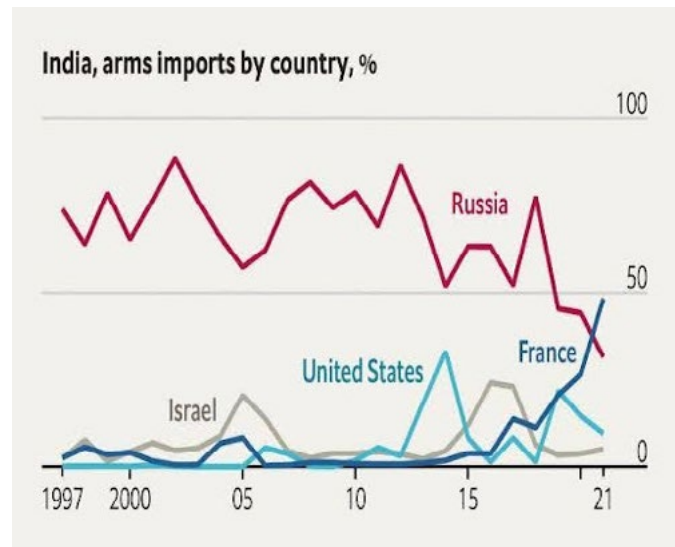
I STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Strategic autonomy refers to the ability of a country to decide on its strategy concerning foreign policy, defense, and economics without being limited by close alliances or imposed conditions from outside. For India, it involved not entering into formal military alliances, taking independent stances on important international matters, and keeping the option of movement open.

In the current era, strategic autonomy means the power to interact extensively, choose partners carefully, and not get caught in a zero-sum bloc game rather than it being strict isolation or equidistance. India presently refers to its strategy by using words like "autonomy through diversification," keeping its openness in different matters.

I ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Asymmetric interdependence is one of the key features of globalization and the power-shift era. It means that states may be economically connected but the dependency is uneven (one side is more vulnerable) (Keohane & Nye, 2012). In the case of India, this can be seen in trade with China (large volumes of imports) and defense procurement from Russia, while India is trying to lessen its vulnerabilities through "Atmanirbhar Bharat," indigenisation, and supply-chain diversification. Critics argue that India's capability to work independently is restricted by its dependence on Russian arms or Chinese trade (Joshi, 2024; War on the Rocks, 2023; The Indian Express, 2023).

Image Source 1: seair.coImage Source 2: [The Economist](https://www.economist.com)

I FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO MULTI-ALIGNMENT

India changing its foreign policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment is a response to changes in global political scenarios. During the Cold War, non-alignment was a feasible way for India to keep its strategic independence in a bipolar world. However, the emergence of a multipolar international system, the escalating competition among the major powers, and the rise of China have impelled India to take a more flexible and self-interested approach. While conventional non-alignment focused mainly on maintaining a safe distance from military blocs, the present multi-alignment doctrine is more about practical cooperation with different partners to get the best out of the national interests. India's co-existence in such groups as the Quad and BRICS+ is a clear manifestation of this change, as it shows India's strategic diversification rather than a mere ideological stance.

I WHY CHANGE NOW?

Several structural drivers underpin this transition:

1. The world is becoming more multipolar with less U.S. hegemonic influence.
2. The growth of India: The Indian economy is now the fifth largest in the world and India has become a major military and regional power. More authority comes hand in hand with more expectation and liberty in making decisions.
3. The China problem: India shares a long border with China, there is competition and rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, and India has to be very careful in balancing its relations.
4. Economic and technological necessities: challenges like supply-chain fragility, essential minerals, and semiconductor geopolitics are a few of the reasons that compel India to search for new partners in various parts of the world.
5. Changes in the nature of multilateral institutions: Mini laterals and flexible coalitions (instead of stiff blocs) are getting more and more important, which is in line with India's way.

I ANALYTICAL LENSES

Thus, in assessing India's evolving foreign policy we ask:

1. Can India employ multi-alignment effectively in such a way that it maintains its freedom to be independent and makes its own decisions?
2. What are the advantages of such a policy (influence, access, deterrence, economic gain)?
3. What difficulties does India face (entanglements, opposing blocs, credibility, capacity constraints)?
4. In what ways does asymmetric interdependence restrict or hinder autonomy?
5. What changes in policy or reforms of institutions is India required to make in order to keep up this strategy?

II CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

I THE QUAD – INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY ARCHITECTURE



Image Source: [Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2023](#).

The Quad, consisting of India, the U.S., Japan and Australia, has changed from a casual conversation to a more significant security grouping aimed at stabilizing the Indo-Pacific. India's involvement is a clear signal of its identification with other democracies having the same mindset as well as its ambition to influence the local regional order (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Observer Research Foundation, 2023; CSIS, 2022).

Benefits for India

Strengthens India's deterrence capability to confront China's naval expansion (South China Sea, Indian Ocean) (Chopra, 2023).

Enables technology collaboration (e.g., semiconductors, rare-earth supply-chains) and defence interoperability (Pant and Saha, 2022).

Elevates India's international image as playing a significant role in a "security club" increases trust and global influence (Joshi, 2024).

Challenges / autonomy risks

Although the Quad is a non-allied entity, a more profound security collaboration might push India close to U.S. strategic goals, thereby increasing the risk of entanglement or loss of autonomy. India is increasingly blurring the line by the operational depth of its U.S. defence agreements even though it resists formal alliances. China sees the Quad as a threat; hence, involvement could be a reason for a retaliatory response and coerce India to take a side. India has to maintain a balance while being a member of the Quad. Up to now, India has avoided making full alliance commitments or formal treaty obligations (CFR, 2023). The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Risks. CFR Analysis).

Recent developments

India organized multilateral naval exercises (e.g., Malabar) (SIPRI, 2024). with Quad partners; India has signed numerous strategic agreements (COMCASA-Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), (LEMOA-Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), (BECA-Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence) that improve interoperability even though India is not a formal member of the alliance.

Strategic autonomy angle

India employs the Quad platform, however, maintaining a non-aligned nature: it is a member but does not share the power as a junior partner. This is an example of the multi-alignment mindset: involvement to get the advantages, refrain from making binding agreements.

I BRICS+ (BRICS+) GLOBAL SOUTH/NON-WESTERN MULTILATERALISM

India is still a vibrant member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and has been in favor of its extension (the "+" stands for the new members). By its participation, India is signaling not only that it is not in the Western camp but also that it is a proper member of the Global South, therefore, increasing its diplomatic power (Joshi, 2024).

Benefits

1. With its membership, India now has a say in a different multilateral framework, which allows it to influence standards and topics of discussion outside the Western sphere.
2. Participation with China and Russia by this means keeps India's relations intact with the non
3. Western powers and provides it with the means to access energy, defence and raw-material

sources. Just as an illustration, India is still buying oil from Russia and Russia-made defence equipment while at the same time it is deepening its relations with the West.

4. Being a part of BRICS and playing an active role there strengthens India's image as a global power which is on the rise, and not just a regional one.



Image Source: [Hindustan Times](#).

Challenges / autonomy risks

As China and Russia are the main influencers within BRICS, India may come across situations of conflict with them when their interests are different from that of India. For example, India is competing with China although they are both members of BRICS.

The enlargement of BRICS might result in less unity among the members, and India may have trouble with its trustworthiness if it fails to harmonize its relationships with the West and being a member of BRICS.

Recent developments

India was the BRICS chair in 2023, took an active part in the enlargement talks, and has been using the platform to advocate for the reform of the institutions of global governance (for example, in the the UN Security Council & IMF) (SIPRI, 2024).

Strategic autonomy angle

Being in BRICS is a conscious move of keeping non-Western engagement going which, in turn, increases autonomy by not being dependent only on the Western-led structures. Therefore, India is employing the two-pronged strategy: strong security ties with the West (through Quad) and, at the same time, maintaining relations with the East/South (through BRICS+).

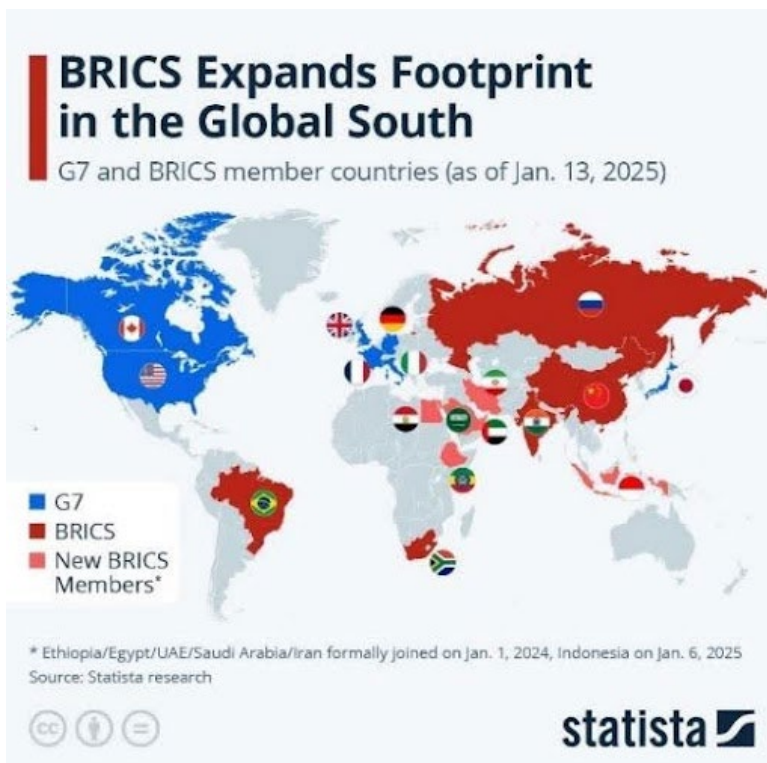


Image Source: [Statista Research](#)

I 3.3. I2U2 (I2U2) – ECONOMIC-TECH CORRIDOR AND WEST-ASIA LINKAGES

The I2U2 group (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, United States) is a recent multilateral combination that is mostly concentration on economic, technology, infrastructure, energy and food security cooperation rather than a defence one (Chopra, 2023).

Benefits

This supports India's West Asia plan by connecting the areas of energy, infrastructure (India-Middle East-Europe corridor), and technology cooperation. By opening new doors for India outside the Indo-Pacific region, the country is able to establish closer relationships with the Gulf, Israel (technology start-ups, defence), and the U.S. Enables India to become part of the new supply-chain and connectivity networks that are coming up. For instance, renewable energy parks, battery storage in Gujarat under I2U2 (Journal of Strategic Studies, 2023).

Challenges / autonomy risks

These groupings are mainly shaped by the objectives of the U.S. and Israel (Journal of Strategic Studies, 2023). Therefore, India should be careful not to become so closely aligned that she would lose her own way or be involuntarily drawn into the regional US-Israel-Gulf security frameworks. Conflicts in West Asia (for instance Iran, Palestine) could make it difficult for India to maintain equilibrium with the Gulf partners, Israel, and the rest of the Global South.

Recent developments

The hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat has been put into operation under the I2U2 framework; the four members have announced co-ventures in space (Journal of Strategic Studies, 2023).

Strategic autonomy angle

The I2U2 is an opportunity for India to go further in economic and technological partnerships with less binding security alliance obligations.

INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR



Image Source 1: [Asia-Pacific Applied Economics Association](#) Image Source 2: [U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India Association](#)

II POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I BENEFITS OF INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY

India, through its involvement in various groupings, does not run the risk of being considered a mere junior partner of any single power. The country maintains what is called “venue power” that is the capacity to influence the proceedings in multilateral forums (Mohan, 2023). Collaborations provide India with the means to obtain cutting-edge technology (Quad countries), energy/arms (Russia, West Asia), supply-chain diversification (Gulf, Japan, Korea).

Multi-alignment is a very useful strategy in a fast-changing world. It makes it possible to hedge against various shifts (e.g., U.S. policy shifts, China’s assertiveness, sanctions pressure). A good example of that is the case of India, which kept importing Russian oil and arms even when the West was putting pressure on it.

Engagement in BRICS+, I2U2 and Global South forums provides India with the means to gain soft power and influence the setting of new norms that are beneficial to its interests. Most of the

alliances have conditions that have to be met. India's strategy is at the highest level of freedom and still manages to reap the benefits of cooperation.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS TO AUTONOMY

- 1. Conflicting bloc interests:** The United States, China, Russia, and the Gulf states are frequently four players in different or even opposing policies. India's involvement in various frameworks might result in inconsistencies or coercion in making difficult decisions (e.g., in the case of the escalation of U.S.-Russia or Israel-Iran tensions).
- 2. Credibility and trust deficits:** If India distributes its bets or seems hesitant to "choose a side", partners might raise the question of India's trustworthiness. Consequently, the worth of India's partnerships could be diminished (Pant and Saha 2022).
- 3. Resource/capability constraints:** Strategic autonomy requires the capacity (defence, technology, diplomacy); if India does not have enough self-reliant capabilities, then it will be more tempting or necessary to align with stronger powers thereby reducing autonomy. As an example, India is still importing a large share of its arms (around 36% from Russia) and is quite heavily dependent on certain imports (semiconductors) (SIPRI, 2024).
- 4. Asymmetric interdependence risks:** Over-reliance (for instance, on Chinese supply-chains, Russian energy/arms) may hamper India's liberty of action. In addition, these dependences can be taken advantage of.
- 5. Operational tension in foreign policy:** The involvement in a number of, at times, conflicting, frameworks call for a very high level of diplomatic skill. A good instance of this would be India having to manage maritime cooperation with the U.S. and at the same time not provoking China in its neighbourhood.
- 6. Domestic political and institutional strain:** The multi-alignment requires the setting of the right diplomatic tone, having strong institutions, a well-coordinated defense/technology policy, and good inter-ministerial relations; a shortfall in any of these can weaken the disposition.

I RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING INDIA'S INDEPENDENT STATECRAFT

1. In order to cut down the asymmetric dependencies, India is required to improve its local defence-industrial base, semiconductor manufacturing, rare-earth/critical-minerals processing, AI/cyber capabilities.
2. India needs to set up defined criteria for its diplomatic actions instead of practicing ad-hoc diplomacy. The criteria can define the conditions of joining a minilateral, refraining from it, or maintaining the freedom of decision-making. It might consist of a "Multi-Alignment Strategic Framework" in the foreign ministry/NDMA for evaluating the costs and benefits of various groupings.
3. A country like India which is continuously changing its alliances needs a top-notch diplomacy, foresight analysis, and scenario planning to be able to handle the contradictory pressures (for instance, U.S.-Russia, Israel-Iran) effectively.
4. Security partnerships should not be the only area where India gets involved at the risk of being drawn in. What is more, economic and technological co-operation are of equal importance and

are less binding. The way of the I2U2 is an illustration.

5. It is not the case that every partnership brings equal benefits. India ought to emphasize those which promote its main interests (territorial integrity, economic growth, technological advancement, regional influence) and stay away from making commitments that may jeopardize her freedom of action.
6. The continued grip of India over the local area (South Asia, Indian Ocean region) is still the basis. If India is to let go of her sway there, her global multi-alignment will be of less value. Infrastructure, connectivity, development diplomacy, maritime presence is of great importance.
7. India must design its multi-aligned strategy differently from that of “hedging” or “sitting on the fence”. Instead, it should be considered as a positive way of: facilitating a free, open, rules-based world while retaining one’s own sovereignty. This feature increases trustworthiness with partners.
8. In areas of trade, technology, and defence: diversify the suppliers (e.g. non-China supply chains), create strategic stocks/reserves, and open up new routes (e.g. through the Gulf, Central Asia) to reduce the risk.
9. India should build up strength by means of local substitution, regional supply chains, and strategic buffers to be able to confront a period of time sanctioned by sanctions, tech-controls, and supply disruption (e.g., post Ukraine war).

II CONCLUSION

India’s move out of ideological non-alignment towards pragmatic multi-alignment is essentially a strategic development to increase its options instead of selecting a side. Delhi, through various frameworks like the Quad, BRICS+, and I2U2, has broadened the partnerships and deepened its geopolitical and economic influence. However, it is necessary to manage the conflicts between powers and the risks of dependence very carefully in order to continue with this stance. If India enhances domestic capacity, lessens vulnerabilities, and keeps the major players’ expectations at a level of equilibrium, then multi-alignment will still be an option. The multi-alignment will shift from being a mere tactical hedge to a consistent grand strategy, if New Delhi manages to internalise capacity-building in a systemic way and still maintain its foreign policy identity which is independent, New Delhi will thereby be able to influence the global order which is unfolding instead of merely reacting to it.

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