

# Strategic Autonomy Revisited: India's Geopolitical Balancing Between Russia, the West, and China in the Post-Ukraine War International Order

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## Abstract

The foreign policy of India since the Ukraine War has shown an extremely subtle way of maintaining strategic autonomy while at the same time attempting to balance out long-standing relationships with Russia on one hand and increasing involvement with the West on the other while exercising extreme caution with respect to the development of India-China relations. This research will be examining how the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has caused the world to become increasingly more polarized which is causing India to have to continue to attempt to navigate the tensions of being in a multipolar world and to avoid completely being aligned with any of the major power blocks. Historical alliances as well as the current changes in the geopolitical landscape are analysed to illustrate the many ways in which India is currently attempting to maintain its dependence on Russia for defense, as well as increase its economic and security cooperation with the West, as well as to reduce the tensions with China on the border. It is found in this study that India's actions to remain neutral (or balanced) between competing powers will strengthen India's place in a multipolar world; however, India still faces many obstacles in the form of the growing alignment between China and Russia. Therefore, the approach that India has taken will not only preserve India's autonomy, but it will also contribute to the stabilization of the world through the creation of multi-alliance approaches.

**Keywords:** Strategic Autonomy, Indian Foreign Policy, Indo-Russian Relations, Indo-Western Engagements, Sino-Indian Relations, Ukraine War, Geopolitical Balancing, Multipolar Order

## Introduction

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the international system was forever changed, in addition to being rapidly transformed into a multipolar system; The conflict also compelled India to reassess its strategy of "strategic autonomy," or the ability to make independent decisions without being influenced by outside factors. Historically, India has used its relationships with the large powers of the world to protect its national interests i.e. its access to oil and gas, its military strength, and its influence on regional matters (Kara, 2025). As such, the post-Ukraine balance of power for India involves maintaining positive relationships with

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Russia one of India's primary defense partners at the same time as engaging positively with the Western countries and thereby gaining from their technology and economy, and at the same time countering China's growing assertiveness in the Asian region. India's strategic hedging, which involves maintaining positive relationships with a number of powerful states around the world, while at the same time attempting to avoid taking sides among them in order to gain maximum advantage and minimize risk is reflective of the complexity of India's position in a world where great power rivalry is increasing (Kara, 2025). This approach is consistent with India's post-Cold War foreign policy, which has evolved from non-alignment to strategic autonomy i.e. a hedging strategy, aimed at maintaining a favorable balance of power relative to other powerful states (Muraviev et al., 2021). As such, this approach enables India to address the many complex challenges facing the world today, while at the same time maintaining the flexibility to pursue India's own national interest in an increasingly changing world (Park, 2025). Furthermore, India's commitment to multi-alignment (i.e. not just hedging) emphasizes India's commitment to actively participating in international affairs related to the country's national interest and priority (Williams & Papa, 2020). Such pro-activity places India as an important player in the evolution of the emerging multipolar world and thus legitimates India as the hub of the global south (Abbasi, 2023).

This paper will explore how India's strategy has successfully addressed the complexities of the international system, while at the same time solidifying its position in the evolving international system.

### **Background: India's Strategic Autonomy in Historical Context**

India's commitment to Strategic Autonomy was first developed in the context of the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War and is now expressed in the form of Multi-Alignment in the 21st Century (Morales, 2025). Through this method, India can work with many different types of partners – while avoiding entering into formal alliances – in order to serve the best interests of the nation rather than ideologically aligned interests (Hall, 2016). Prior to the war in Ukraine, India had strong economic relationships with Russia, as well as a significant reliance upon Russian military equipment and energy supplies – accounting for greater than 60 percent of both categories. At the same time, the relationship between India and the West – specifically with the United States – was developing within several frameworks that are intended to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the border dispute and competing interests in South Asia present a challenge to India's direct bilateral relationships with China. The Ukrainian conflict disrupted the status quo of India's relationships with all three countries (Russia, the West and China), creating an environment in which the West imposed sanctions against Russia and Russia then sought to strengthen its bilateral relationships with non-Western countries – such as India and China – and thus isolating itself from the rest of the world (Verma, 2023). As a result of this changed international landscape, India has been forced to reassess and update its strategic calculations – as the country seeks to maintain its long-standing relationship with Russia while also increasing its economic relationships with the West and to manage its ongoing great power rivalry with China (Kara, 2025; Park, 2025). These new strategic calculations reflect a shift in India's foreign policy from a traditional non-aligning foreign policy to a more pragmatic, issue-

based coalition-building foreign policy (Morales, 2025; Sisodia & Seth, 2025) – and therefore India’s multi-alignment foreign policy strategy is not simply a means to avoid making binary choices, but rather to proactively assert its preferences and shape how other states interact with India on India’s terms (Verma, 2023).

### **India's Relations with Russia Post-Ukraine**

The relationship between India and Russia is a fundamental element of both countries' defense and energy security strategies; The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the partnership is also capable of standing up to strain and adversity. India will continue to purchase discounted Russian oil to meet its own energy requirements and help Russia evade western sanctions (Bhagwat & Rogachev, 2025). There are many bilateral projects that were developed prior to the conflict which include joint energy corridors and transportation systems that will increase connectivity throughout Eurasia. This illustrates Russia's shift towards using India as an alternative to China as a mechanism to offset the increasing dependency it has created with its partner, utilizing New Delhi as a counter-balance in an increasingly complex and multi-polar world (Mukhia & Zou, 2022). As a result of western criticism India abstained from the UN resolutions that condemned Russia's actions and framed its decision making as a defense of its "strategic autonomy" and not as an endorsement of aggression. Critics of India's decision point out that by doing so Russia was able to escape diplomatic isolation and that India emerged as one of the most important players in Russia's multi-vector foreign policy strategy (Verma, 2024). India chose to engage in this way because it understood that disengaging from Russia would be detrimental to India's national interest due to its ongoing dependence upon Russian arms to counter the threat from China (Kapoor, 2023). Finally, India's continued engagement with Russia provides a real-world example of how India can implement its policy of multi-alignment to maximize its national interest and maintain its strategic autonomy (Morales, 2025).

### **Engagements with the West: Opportunities and Constraints**

India is increasing its interaction with the West as a result of the Ukraine War, which has increased shared perceptions of China's growing influence as well as a desire for India to develop multiple alliances. In response to these developments, the U.S. and other European countries have been actively seeking to engage India as an important swing state in international politics, and are providing India with technology transfer opportunities and defense cooperation opportunities to help decrease India's dependence upon Russian weapons systems. The U.S.-India initiative on critical and emerging technologies (iCET), as an example, provides an opportunity for the two nations to work together in areas of semiconductor development and space development (Muraviev et al., 2021). While the ties between India and the West continue to deepen, there are also significant limitations in the area of economic relations between India and the West, including trade imbalances and intellectual property rights issues. India has thus far maintained a neutral stance vis-a-vis Western pressures to fully commit to opposing Russia, to ensure that it maintains independence of action. These efforts have paid off for India, as the Western countries now recognize India's importance in helping to stabilize the Indo-Pacific region amidst multipolar changes (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). There are differences in how India and the West view certain global issues, such as the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, and India frequently does not support the Western consensus on such issues (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). The fact that India is willing to act in opposition to the expectations of its Western partners on occasion highlights India's continued focus on its national interest and geopolitical calculus, regardless of the potential impact upon the India-Western relationship (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). By using this nuanced approach, India is able to maximize the benefits of its relationships with both blocs and enhance its negotiating capabilities as well as secure favorable terms regarding technology transfer, defense cooperation and trade agreements. Overall, this approach will further solidify India's status as an influential player in global affairs, and enable India to shape global events, as opposed to simply reacting to those events.

### **Managing Relations with China Amid Sino-Russian Alignment**

India is faced with strategic challenges due to China's "no limits" partnership with Russia after Ukraine (Kapoor, 2023) that are increasing the perception of being surrounded by China (Kondapalli, 2023). The strengthening of the Sino-Russian axis due to Beijing's financial aid and diplomatic support of Moscow is an increase in concern for India regarding it becoming a threat to Indian regional interests (Kondapalli, 2023). These concerns have been exacerbated by border clashes between India and China such as the Galwan clash of 2020, which exemplifies the antagonistic relationship between India and China (Kondapalli, 2023). As a result of these developments, India has been able to utilize its relationships with the west to create a counter-balance against China while using limited dialogue to mitigate escalation (Kara, 2025). Ironically, the growing closeness of China and Russia presents India with opportunities to deepen its alliances with the west; ultimately placing New Delhi at the center of Eurasia's geopolitical landscape (Kara, 2025). To address the developing situation, India's strategy will be centered on de-escalating tensions with China, through economic decoupling from China in key sectors. This is consistent with the trend of increased strategic autonomy in the Global South (Kara, 2025).

### **The Balancing Act: Implications for Multipolar Order**

The success of India's strategic maneuvering in a post-Ukraine world demonstrates how strategic autonomy can be applied successfully within a fractured world order. As such, through maintaining equi-distant relationships, India has increased its ability to play a role in influencing the emergence of a multi-polar world order, with middle powers like itself playing a significant part in shaping the outcome of events. In addition to its impact upon the development of a multi-polar world order, India's neutral/non-aligned stance is likely to contribute positively towards global stability, as India's non-aligned stance will prevent the formation of rigid blocs (Wojczewski, 2017). Moreover, this multi-aligned diplomacy, which India pursues to advance its national interest while enhancing global diversity and flexibility, is indicative of a sophisticated foreign policy (Park, 2025). As such, India's hedging between the major players of the world enables India to navigate the current era of great power rivalry, while enabling India to assert its own individualistic identity (Park, 2025). Additionally, this demonstrated level of strategic agility also marks a departure from historical forms of non-alignment, which signifies a high-level of sophistication in India's foreign policy, and an intention to expand India's strategic space in response to the uncertainty of the international

environment (Kara, 2025; Verma, 2023). Lastly, India's demonstrated capacity to engage in an intricate balancing act, which has resulted in India advancing its national interests and increasing its strategic autonomy in a highly complex geopolitical environment, is consistent with the principles of India's foreign policy decisions (Morales, 2025; Verma, 2023). Despite these successes, there are still risks associated with India's strategy. For example, India may become overly reliant on Russian military equipment due to Western sanctions and/or the potential for increased escalation in relations with China. Thus, possible future trajectories may involve greater diversification in India's defense sourcing and/or deeper involvement in Western led initiatives, while maintaining critical bilateral and/or multilateral relationships. However, overall, India's strategy supports the viability of multi-alignment as a means of addressing current and/or emerging challenges.

### Conclusion

India's strategic autonomy in the new global order following the Ukraine war has evolved into an art of maintaining balance among Russia, the Western world and China; a strategy that protects its own interests while providing a bridge among the three great powers of today, creating a more pluralistic multipolar environment. As the world continues to evolve and the dynamics continue to shift, India's ability to effectively maintain this type of relationship will be a critical factor in maintaining both domestic and international stability. In addition to maintaining the delicate balance between all of the other actors on the global stage, India needs to ensure that the risk associated with the maintenance of strategic autonomy is mitigated through continued diversification and dialogue; thus, strategic autonomy can remain a means of empowerment, and not simply a source of isolation.

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