

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AT A CROSSROADS: BETWEEN BOLDNESS AND RESTRAINT

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to unveil the evolving nature of India's strategic autonomy in the background of an emerging “multiplex world order” characterised by competing power centres, dispersed legitimacy and contested global governance. Against this backdrop, this study revolves around three critical objectives: first, it traces the historical foundations and evolution of India's strategic autonomy in response to the changing geopolitical needs of global politics; second, it examines India's strategic choices concerning its regional stability and great power rivalry; third, it also explores India's dynamic role as a voice of the Global South. Given this context, this study argues that the Indian quest for autonomy is anchored by its historical experience and civilisational values, rather than by mere strategic calculations. The article further traces India's strategic shift from non-alignment to a pragmatic stance in the post-Cold War period, and, finally, to the current multi-alignment strategy. It investigates how New Delhi seeks to establish ties with the United States, China, and Russia without committing to any of the rigid alliances. It also addresses India's growing engagement with various regional and multilateral institutions like BRICS, QUAD, SCO, and G20 to secure its regional and global interests. The paper concludes that strategic autonomy today operates as an issue-based, flexible, and pragmatic approach that enables India to make independent foreign policy decisions, engage with multiple centres of power, align situationally, and establish itself as a stabilising force and a prominent mouthpiece of the Global South.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Autonomy, Multiplex World, Diffused Legitimacy, Global Governance, Global South, Foreign Policy.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a “multiplex world”, as delineated by Amitav Acharya in his article “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of Multipolar World Order”, explains how the contemporary international order has undergone transformation owing to the proliferation of multiple centres of power, diffused legitimacy, a variety of civilisational and regional forms of influence and the overlapping of governance, which has signalled the decline of the previously hierarchical, Eurocentric, Western-dominant world order (Acharya, 2017). This shift drives world politics beyond the bipolar Cold War system and the unipolar hegemony of the United States toward multialigned, multilateral configurations that encourage pluralism, decentralised leadership, South-South cooperation, and the rise of new power centres, including China and India. In this complex setting, India's strategic autonomy progressively manifests as selective, issue-driven, flexible partnerships, calculated hedging and robust multilateral interactions, while eschewing rigid alliances. As Shashi Tharoor, the Member of Parliament, Government of India and the former UN Under Secretary-General and the former Minister of State for External Affairs, comments: “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” (Tharoor, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this study revolves around three critical objectives: first, it traces the historical foundations and evolution of India's strategic autonomy in response to the changing geopolitical needs of global politics; second, it examines India's strategic choices concerning its regional stability and great power rivalry; third, it also explores India's dynamic role as a voice of the Global South.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research method to explain India's strategic autonomy in a changing multiplex world order. It uses process tracing to examine the

historical stages of India's strategic autonomy, tracing a gradual shift from non-alignment to post-Cold War pragmatism and to the present multi-alignment. A conceptual framework based on Amitav Acharya's "Multiplex World Order" has been used in this study to analyse the recent shift in India's foreign policy. The study draws on empirical data from the analysis of official statements, policy papers, parliamentary and ministerial speeches, and institutional reports, and is cross-examined through secondary literature on strategic affairs.

THE SHIFTING FACES OF INDIAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Notwithstanding this, India's quest for strategic autonomy is grounded in a strategic culture profoundly shaped by its historical experience, civilisational spirit, and collective memory, rather than by rational calculation alone. State behaviour, as the concept of strategic culture presented by Jack L. Snyder reveals, is fashioned by internalised historical and institutional conditions (Snyder, 1977). Similarly, in the case of India, the pragmatism of Kautilya, anti-colonial consciousness, and civilisational values have validated the imperative for India's inclination towards autonomy, gradualism and restraint. Hence, the repositioning of India in a multiplex world order is not merely a balancing of power but a tricky accommodation of a decade-old strategic culture with the contemporary compulsions of geopolitical realities.

Strategic autonomy has been the mainstay of Indian foreign policy, evolving from a variant of the non-alignment policy of the Cold War period to a pragmatic, flexible approach of the 1990s and to a multi-alignment model in the present day. In recent decades, it has become increasingly evident that the United Nations has turned into an even less effective mechanism for global governance; simultaneously, the conventional world-leader status of the United States is beginning to erode. The recent trade war between the United States and China, and the latter's rapid rise as a superpower, have further complicated the geopolitical landscape. Besides, the disaggregation of institutions worldwide has, in sum, transformed the global political space into a complex theatre of rival orders. Against this turbulent backdrop, India's strategic posture appears steadfast: a pragmatic approach to autonomy, not a desire for permanent seclusion, but a strategic calculation to maintain its ability to manoeuvre independently across various fronts and broadening the set of strategic choices, being mindful of its colonial past and civilisational traditions. During the 2025 Aravalli Summit, the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar emphasised that India's interests are "optimally safeguarded by maximising opportunities and preserving freedom of choice". "Imagine, if today, you were not adopting strategic autonomy.

Please tell me which country you would like to join up with and put our future in their hands. I can't think of anybody...To me, my interest is best secured by maximising my opportunities and maintaining my freedom of choice" – he further remarks (Haidar, 2025).

THE UNFOLDING OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In order to understand different phases of India's strategic autonomy, it is necessary to critically analyse the way in which the foreign policy of India has been transformed in response to changing global and regional forces. Such a course of action summarises the nation's efforts to balance sovereign prerogatives with meaningful involvement. To offer an analytical discussion of this evolution, this essay outlines India's diplomatic posture into three different timeframes – the period of Non-Alignment and moral autonomy (1947-1991); the Post- Cold War era of strategic pragmatism (1991-2010); and the modern phase characterised by multi-alignment and strategic flexibility in a multipolar world (2010-present) which requires further discussion in the following sections:

The Era of Non-Alignment and Moral Autonomy (1947-1991)

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru played a central role in articulating the doctrine of non-alignment, which has guided India's foreign policy during the first four decades after independence. This strategic direction was structured on India's need to secure its independence in a bipolar world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The doctrine echoed the civilisational ethos of national self-determination, the collective memory of the struggle of colonies against imperialist rule, and Nehru's far-sighted vision of India as a morally responsible nation within the global collective setting.

When India established the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, it provided a coherent leadership framework for the newly decolonised countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The NAM explicitly rejected bloc politics in favour of promoting disarmament, dismantling apartheid, and achieving economic equity. Non-alignment, according to Nehru and his successors, was not a passive avoidance of great power politics but a proactive effort to establish international norms. In his insightful essay, "From Non-Alignment to Pro-Imperialism: Class and Foreign Policy in India under Nehru's Leadership", Jayantanuja notes that NAM offered a potent collective voice for the Global South and uttered the dream of a just international order (Bandyopadhyaya, 2009, p.7). At the same time, India maintained the ability to be pragmatically engaged with the Soviet Union when necessary, as in the case of the 1971 Treaty

of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1971), which was signed on the eve of the outright start of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Critics argued that such a move brought India closer to Moscow, but the Delhi administration considered it necessary in the context of the US-China-Pakistan nexus. Accordingly, the principles of non-alignment served as both a policy and a strategy, helping India avoid entanglement in rigid alliances and remain selectively cooperative when its survival and independence were in danger.

The Post-Cold War Phase of Strategic Pragmatism (1991-2010)

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's principal strategic partner, coincided with a balance-of-payments crisis in 1991. This twin shock prepared India to enter an era of hard-headed review. Consequently, India took an agenda of economic liberalisation and sought to integrate with the world economy under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. During this period, it normalised its relations with Israel in 1992, expanded its outreach to the Gulf states, and was cautious about deepening ties with the United States, without compromising defence cooperation with Russia. Also, The Gujral Doctrine turned into a non-reciprocal goodwill initiative in South Asia. However, India was not afraid to assert its authority on the issue when it was considered a sovereign state. The 1998 nuclear tests conducted by the government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee reinforced the resolve of the country to resist foreign sanctions and remained firm to uphold its atomic autonomy. The 1999 Kargil War, which was observed worldwide, also served as another example of India's determination to defend its territory. The relationship between India and the United States at the beginning of the 2000s was dramatically transformed, culminating in the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008. This historic agreement brought an end to decades of nuclear seclusion and placed India as a responsible policy-maker in the nuclear world. As Chakraborty argues: "This historic event in India-US relations signified a turning point after years of strained connections following India's 1998 nuclear tests. Notably, India accomplished this without severing ties with Russia, which continued to supply armaments and oil. This period witnessed the emergence of a pragmatic India, one that balanced great-power alliances, accepted globalisation, and redefined autonomy in terms of an adaptability for survival" (Chakraborty, 2025, p.10).

Multi-alignment and Strategic Flexibility in a Multipolar World (2010-present)

The ethos of pragmatism has been reimagined through the twenty-first century's affirmation of multi-alignment, which offers a country greater room to manoeuvre in a more multipolar international environment. This new approach is based on flexibility, issue-based engagement and the conscious avoidance of rigid ideological affiliations.

India, under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, has developed a web of bilateral and multilateral relations that fit into the competing and overlapping structures. The Neighbourhood First policy of India aims to consolidate the country's strategic position in South Asia by prioritising political trust, economic integration, and security cooperation with immediate neighbours through numerous regional and sub-regional projects. Although the functionality of SAARC has declined drastically due to the continued political constraints, India continues to advance regional cooperation by refocusing on other sub-regional arrangements. India pursues its Act East Policy through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which links South Asia with Southeast Asia, thereby minimising its dependence on a single partner. Additionally, India has been promoting cross-border trade, energy cooperation and transport integration under the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative; on the one hand, the BIMSTEC Master Plan (2022-2028) (Asian Development Bank, 2022) that outlines 264 projects worth 126 USD (Policy Circle Bureau, 2025) has significantly strengthened connectivity in the Bay of Bengal, on the other. Most strikingly, India has been a member of BRICS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and India-Israel-UAE-USA (I2U2), indicating its capacity to coexist with competing, often rival blocs anchored by the countervailing strategic choices of the United States of America, Russia, China and the Gulf states. Accommodating these varying interests, without sacrificing its own, contributes to the realisation of Indian identity, not only as a balancing power but also as a central actor within the multi-aligned global order.

The rise of a "multiplex world" posed both opportunities and challenges for India's foreign affairs. India, in its emerging status as a great power with global ambitions, is seeking to weigh its traditional commitment to strategic autonomy amid the realities of great-power competition. The next focus of this study will be on how New Delhi navigates these complexities and multiple forms of alignment through its evolving policy approach.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC INDEPENDENCE IN A VOLATILE NEIGHBOURHOOD: SWINGING BETWEEN BOLDNESS AND RESTRAINT

A recent strategic tweak by India in South Asia is indicative of a subtle shift in its neighbourhood policy in line with changing geopolitical conditions. Operation Sindoor signalled that India is increasingly confident in its ability to assert its independent strategic agency, a marked change after years of restraint with Pakistan. It implies New Delhi's intention to be bold and independent in defending its interests, stabilising the situation in its surrounding zone, and ushering in a new era of self-directed, assertive statecraft in the region (Gateway House, 2025).

Further, the recent Afghanistan-Pakistan dispute has also significantly altered the power balance in South Asia. The escalating violence along the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan has turned into a crossroad to the strategic repositioning of India in this region. The constant border wars and the deterioration in the relations between Islamabad and Kabul are indicative of the weakening of the traditional influence over the Taliban by Pakistan (Sami, 2024). Such a shift provides India with an opportunity to improve its position in Afghanistan through humanitarian assistance, development projects, and moderate diplomatic engagement, thereby strengthening its role as a stabilising force without direct military investment. India's re-engagement with Afghanistan is measured but definite; it aligns with its hope for a functional, multipolar South Asia.

The changes in Bangladesh under Muhammad Yunis-led interim government following the overthrow of Sheikh Hasina, and the increasing bonhomie between Dhaka and Beijing (Ranjan, 2025), have also compelled India to reconfigure its foreign policy towards Bangladesh. The cancellation of Bangladeshi visa services in New Delhi following the unrest after the Osman Hadi killing and anti-India protest in the soil of Bangladesh has interrupted the long-standing people-to-people relations and the mutual cooperative efforts, leaving underlying tensions between the two capitals in the limelight (Times of India, 2025). Simultaneously, the increased pace of interaction between Dhaka and China, as evidenced by the presence of Chinese influence at Payra Port and the expansion of defence procurement (Samsani, 2021), including the Type 035G Ming-class submarines and other Chinese naval weapons (Funairole et al., 2023), has reduced Indian influence in Bangladesh's strategic calculus. Given this scenario, India has adopted both hard and soft measures to maintain a strategic position in Bangladesh's evolving political environment. New Delhi has publicly criticised violence like lynching and killing of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, thus showing a hard-line attitude toward human rights issues, but at the same time has been diplomatic by paying condolences on the death of Khaleda Zia, ensuring that dialogue continues and bilateral relations are restored. India also seeks to strengthen its interactions with the eastern flank through

connectivity and economic interdependence. The India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, the Akhaura Agartala rail connection, and the BBIN Motor Vehicle Pact deserve to be on the list of projects that keep Dhaka economically in tune with India, even with the growing role of China in its infrastructure. In this unstable and competitive environment, India seeks to preserve its strategic independence by balancing a hard-line approach to critical security needs and human-rights issues with a long-term commitment to diplomatic engagement and economic integration. By diversifying the mechanisms of influence, such as sub-regional collaboration, infrastructural connectivity and selective diplomatic overtures, New Delhi is arguably trying to maintain its strategic agility without being caught up in any exclusive relationships or being provoked into outright confrontation.

Considering Maldivian-Indian relations, the so-called "India Out campaign" (Sultana, 2025) created a burden during the governance of President Mohamed Muizzu; however, the Government of India, neither coercing nor compromising, has followed a path of strategic autonomy, thereby maintaining a culture of defence and developmental cooperation swiftly. These developments highlight the continuity of India's strategic independence in the Indian Ocean basin, where power is maintained through diplomacy rather than alignment politics despite anti-India sentiment. Simultaneously, the internal conflict in Myanmar since the military coup in 2021 presents a security and strategic threat to India. The India-Myanmar border remains volatile, and Chinese encroachment via the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) threatens India's Act East strategy (International Crisis Group, 2025). New Delhi continues to balance moral diplomacy with pragmatism, engaging minimally with the junta to ensure security cooperation and protect strategic interests, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which is essential for access to the Northeast region and reducing vulnerability to the Siliguri Corridor.

WASHINGTON AND BEIJING: THE GRAND CHASEBOARD FOR INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The relationship between India and China, as well as between India and the United States, has always been characterised by a constant oscillation between trust and mistrust. The U.S. has assisted India in significant endeavours, including the Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008) and greater defence cooperation. However, the U.S. also has a history of strained relations with India, exemplified by policy backlash, including the former's imposition of sanctions over India after its nuclear tests in 1998 and more recent measures like increasing tariffs on India to 50 per cent and hikes in H1 visa fees. China, on the other side, who once echoed the slogan

“Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai” and was part of the initial wave of Asian solidarity, has deteriorated relations with India due to the 1962 crisis and subsequent border disputes like Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020), revealing mutual distrust at the strategic level, indicating that, while the India-China relationship is feasible, maintaining strong friendship remains challenging.

Therefore, China and the United States are both opportunities and constraints for India, necessitating a delicate diplomatic balance that enables India to maintain strategic independence and national interests without sacrificing its sovereignty. New Delhi is worried about China's territorial claims over Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, its expansionist Belt and Road Initiative, and its growing ties with Pakistan. The Galwan Valley clash (2020), which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh in 2020, marked a low point in bilateral relations between India and China (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). In response, India has modernised its military along the Line of Actual Control through infrastructure development in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, the procurement of Rafale jets and BrahMos missiles, and improved connectivity via projects such as the Sela tunnel and the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO Road (Banerjee, 2025). At the same time, New Delhi has adopted economic deterrence strategies, including banning more than 230 Chinese apps, tightening scrutiny of Chinese FDI, and enhancing defence and intelligence cooperation with Quad partners. While a 2024 border joint-patrolling agreement aimed to stabilise the boundary, it is widely viewed as a tactical pause rather than a genuine reconciliation. Nevertheless, despite ongoing security tensions, economic interdependence remains significant: China became India's largest trading partner in 2023-24, with bilateral trade reaching US\$118.4 billion (Business Standard, 2024), primarily driven by Chinese exports of industrial goods such as electronics, machinery, and chemicals, which increased to US\$120.48 billion (a 2.4 per cent rise), while Indian exports to China slightly declined to US\$17.99 billion (China Briefing, 2025). However, India continues to permit selective Chinese investments and joint ventures in strategic sectors such as electric vehicles and telecommunications, reflecting a recalibration rather than decoupling. Crucially, India's inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides an important diplomatic platform for engaging with China following the 2020 Galwan incident, fostering sustained dialogue through forums such as the SCO Foreign and Defence Ministers' meetings (2023-24) and helping to prevent escalation.

Likewise, the United States presents both opportunities and challenges for India: its Indo-Pacific strategy and commitment to the Quad largely align with India's vision of “a free, open, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific” (The White House,

2025). The India-U.S. relationship can help maintain stability in the region and support a rules-based order through enhanced maritime interoperability and deterrence, particularly via the Malabar Naval Exercise (Press Information Bureau, 2021). The Quad has a legitimate regional presence, especially for India as a key participant, given its geographical location and unresolved border disputes with China. It is also important to note that, while U.S. technological and defence capabilities expand its strategic reach, American involvement in the region remains susceptible to domestic political instability, as demonstrated by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (U.S. Trade Representative, 2017) and its frequent embrace of unilateralism. Consequently, India pursues a balanced policy, strengthening ties with the U.S., Japan, and Australia within the Quad, while also engaging with BRICS and SCO, thereby drawing China and Russia closer and allowing it to maintain strategic flexibility through issue-based diplomacy in an increasingly polarised world.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC LINKAGE WITH RUSSIA: DEPENDENCY AND DILEMMA

The relationship between India and Russia is one of the longest-lasting legacies of India's Cold War foreign policy. Moscow had been the most reliable ally of New Delhi in terms of military assistance, diplomatic support at the United Nations, and decisive political assistance in times of need, as in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In 2025, the 25th year of the India-Russia Strategic Partnership, which the 2000 Declaration inaugurated, is being referred to as a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership. The partnership in defence, energy, space, and technology has included BrahMos, S-400, Kudankulam, and Gaganyaan. Russia is a major supplier of defence imports to India, and bilateral trade is currently estimated at 47 per cent, with a goal of 100 bn dollars by 2030.

However, the 2014 developments in the geopolitics of the post-Cold War period have imposed new constraints. The annexation of Crimea and subsequent conflict between Russia and the West have increased the dependence of Moscow on China, taking away its previous position of being a buffer during India-China tensions. The growing Sino-Russian strategic congruence, as evidenced by joint statements, increased energy and defence collaboration, closer military exercises, and bilateral trade of up to \$240 billion by 2023, complicates India's security calculus, especially following the Galwan incidents in 2020. Therefore, India-Russia relations today are a mixture of old-time trust and strategic pragmatism.

MIDDLE POWERS AS A STRATEGIC ANCHOR IN INDIA'S POLICY OF MULTIALIGNMENT

The relationship with like-minded regional actors, especially Japan, ASEAN, and major states in the Middle East, has become central to India's multilateral policy, helping New Delhi address challenges posed by great-power rivalry and by Europe. Japan, identified as a "Special Strategic and Global Partner", as underscored by the recent report on India-Japan bilateral relations (2025), acts as an anchor in India's Indo-Pacific strategy amid mutual concerns over China; flagship projects worth over ¥6.4 trillion (USD 40 billion), Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, and Northeast connectivity are underway, alongside USD 22 billion of trade in FY 2023-24 and collaborative efforts (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2025).

ASEAN remains critical to India's Act East Policy (Pant, 2016), which provides economic diversity and a platform to support freedom of navigation through the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Widening connectivity, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (Press Information Bureau, 2019), and strengthening defence relations with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore are key strategies to counterbalance China. Likewise, the Middle East supports the energy interests of India and its diaspora; almost 60 per cent of the crude imports are based in the Gulf, and ventures like the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEEC) are an indication of trans-regional interests (Verma, 2025). At the same time, New Delhi is weighing closer ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE alongside the expedited connection with Iran via the Chabahar Port, despite the trade losses imposed by the sanctions in early 2025 following Donald Trump's return to power and the reinstatement of Washington's "maximum pressure" strategy (Moonakal, 2025). These partnerships collectively diversify the strategic choices available to India, reduce excessive reliance on any single great power, strengthen strategic independence, and ensure that India is not merely a balancer but an active participant in regional stability in a fragmented multiplex world.

U.S. TRADE POLICY AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC RECALIBRATION

Recent U.S. tariff policies have considerably increased the stakes for the global economy, prompting a rush to join other multilateral formations, including the BRICS bloc and the SCO. Within the Donald Trump administration, the United States threatened to impose 100 per cent tariffs on the BRICS member states aligned to the alliance, heralding the partnership as an attack on the U.S. dollar (Shakil, 2025), and in February 2025, the G7 was encouraged to impose secondary tariffs on China and India in retaliation for Russian oil purchases (Financial Times, 2025). This pressure encouraged states such as China and Russia to deepen bilateral cooperation to minimise their reliance on

U.S.-based financial systems. At the SCO summit in August-September 2025, the heads of state, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Narendra Modi, articulated a vision of a multipolar, multilateral global order, a vision for "new global order" (Reuters, 2025). A joint statement has also been issued announcing that they would resist external economic coercion and support mechanisms to counter sanctions, such as the proposed SCO Development Bank. In this new, challenging geopolitical reality, India seeks to walk on a delicate diplomatic line: maintaining strategic relationships with the United States while simultaneously developing a new counter-hegemonic triad of China, Russia, and India within a counter-hegemonic economic framework (Blank, 2025).

INDIA'S LEADERSHIP AS A CHAMPION OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

India's strategic autonomy has become a defining aspect of the nation's global identity, as exemplified by its leadership in the G20 and BRICS. Representing the ethos of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", India instrumentalised its G20 Presidency, 2023, to act as a leading representative of the Global South by hosting the Voice of the Global South Summit, under the theme "Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose" (MEA, 2023). At the G20, India supported the African Union's pursuit of permanent membership, thereby ensuring fair representation and developmental justice (G20 India Secretariat, n.d.). The civilisational ideals of India were again aligned more closely with the geopolitical aspiration of "One Earth, One Family, One Future," which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been envisioning (MEA, 2024).

India's role in the BRICS framework aims to strengthen its strategic independence by pursuing selective cooperation while subtly expressing disapproval when necessary. New Delhi supports reforms to multilateral institutions such as the IMF, WTO, and UN Security Council initiated by BRICS, but also objects to China's centralising tendencies within the bloc. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly called for a multipolar and inclusive world order based on substantial reforms to governance, voting rights, and leadership structures that fully address the concerns of the Global South, asserting that old institutions cannot effectively meet 21st-century challenges (PMO, 2025). In addition to normative advocacy, the country develops viable alternatives through trade in local currencies and through active participation in the BRICS New Development Bank and the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre. On March 24, 2024, India, Russia, and China approved the BRICS expansion, which included Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the UAE, thereby increasing representation from the Global South and indicating a transition to a more inclusive multipolarity (BRICS Brasil, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The shift in India's foreign policy from non-alignment towards multi-alignment, illustrates how a country can manoeuvre within a multiplex international system characterised by multiple centres of power, interdependence, and pluralistic systems of governance. This is a transition from strategic reserve to measured assertiveness, evident in Operation Sindoora, the re-engagement with Afghanistan, and a moderate approach to diplomacy in South Asia, marking a turning point in India's regional and international position. New Delhi exhibits a realistic combination of boldness and restraint by acting concurrently with rival power blocs such as the United States, China and Russia and protecting strategic autonomy in a well calculated way. This flexibility makes India a regional stabiliser and an active global player that can influence the situation as it unfolds, rather than merely reacting. Most importantly, India's leadership in the G20 and BRICS, within the broader context of multipolarity, makes it a major contributor to the collective voice of the Global South. Therefore, it can undoubtedly be said that India has not only become a significant power in the contemporary political landscape but also a shaper of a more equitable and diverse international system.

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CHAKRABORTY: INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AT A CROSSROADS

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