



Research Article

# India and the Global South in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT



### Keywords:

Indian Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy, Non-Alignment, Global South, Multipolar World Order, Multi-Alignment

### Article History:

Received: 12-01-2026

Revised: 15-06-2026

Accepted: 20-06-2026

Published: 27-03-2026

A major shift in India's foreign policy has taken place from doctrine of non-alignment during the Cold War era to the present concept of strategic autonomy. The shift is an indication of India's adaptation to the changing international system of a multipolar order, growing competition in geo-political matters, and the rising ascendance of emerging economies. Non-alignment has given India flexibility to protect its sovereignty and stay away from the entanglements of the superpower rivalry while strategic autonomy has given India flexibility to engage multiple power centres at the same time. In recent times India has emerged as one of the prominent representatives of the Global South to voice the demand for a world that is inclusive and equitable. India has tried to link up the interests of developing countries with the developed ones in forums like the BRICS, G20, Voice of Global South Summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This paper looks into the development of India's foreign policy from the non-alignment era to strategic autonomy, and discusses its impact on India's position as a leader in the Global South. The study concludes that strategic autonomy is a continuation instead of denial of India's long-standing commitment to independent decision making. In an era of multipolar world order, India gradually becomes a link between the Global North and the Global South and is striving to become a world power in its own right. The authors argue that India's dynamics in meeting its national interests and the broader developmental needs will play a key role in shaping the global governance architecture.

The titles suggest that this is the first time the case of 'India and Strategic Autonomy' has been explored, and that the issue of non-alignment is being revisited. This is the first time the analysis of 'India and Strategic Autonomy' has been addressed and the Non-Alignment issue has been looked at again.

### Cite this article:

Kumar, N., & Singh, K. (2026). India and the Global South in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy. *Mankind: Adam to Me*, 3(1), 6-14. <https://doi.org/10.55559/mankind.v3i1.30>

## Introduction

The international system is in one of the most significant transformations since the end of the Cold War. Western dominance is slowly diminishing, China is rising, Russia is reclaiming its position and the economies of the emerging economies are gaining traction. The international system that we are living in today is neither bipolar nor unipolar, but has been emerging as a multipolar system in which competing and cooperating multiple centres of power are increasingly present (Acharya, 2017).

In this rapidly evolving geopolitical scenario, India has become a key player. India is a unique mix of developed and developing world, being the most populous country in the world, a leading economy and a leading democracy. With its increasing economic strength, technological progress, demographic dividends and diplomatic outreach, it has asserted itself as part of the global governance architecture (Jaishankar, 2020).

The principle of strategic independence has been a hallmark of India's foreign policy since the formation of the Republic. The protection of strategic independence is an integral feature of India's foreign policy since the establishment of the Republic of India. This was achieved during the Cold War through the doctrine of non-alignment which aimed to keep one's distance from the American and Soviet Bloc. But when the Cold War ended, economic liberalization, globalization and new security threats led to a rethinking of India's outlooks on foreign engagements. Thus, in the 21st century, the strategic autonomy approach became the primary structure of India's foreign policy (Zajaczkowski & Pulami, 2025).

The concept of strategic autonomy is not based on the notion of balance between major powers. Strategic autonomy is not about balancing power with major players, the way that traditional non-alignment was. Rather, it allows India to simultaneously interact with several actors without being constrained in its actions. This has enabled India to deepen connections with the United States,

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have long-standing military relations with Russia, build active ties in BRICS and have robust partnerships in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Indo Pacific (Kumar, 2025). Meanwhile, India has unequivocally asserted its voice as a voice of the Global South. India in its initiatives like Voice of the Global South Summit, has brought development, climate justice, debt sustainability, food security and reform of international institutions, on the forefront. All these moves are part of a larger effort to balance the national interest with the development country aspirations (Ranjan, 2025).

This paper focuses on the shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy in India and its impact on India's position in the Global South. It perhaps stands for the pursuit of strategic autonomy, a modern expression of India's former quest for independent decision-making, and now the key instrument for India's efforts to navigate an increasingly multipolar world.

### **History of Foreign Policy of India: Evolution from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy**

Indian foreign policy has always been dynamic. Ever since independence in 1947 it has worked its way through the shifting domestic priorities and international realities, always with one focus – strategic independence. The language used in policy making and the instruments it creates have changed, but the desire to preserve freedom of decision-making has been a hallmark of India's interactions with the world. The move from non-alignment to strategic autonomy should thus be seen not as a radical shift but as an adaptation to the new geopolitical realities. It has been highlighted that strategic autonomy is the current form of India's quest for independent foreign policy decisions (Pant & Super, 2015).

The genesis of India's foreign policy can be understood in the context of the fight for independence and Jawaharlal Nehru's philosophy. Indian leaders were mindful of the fact that they had been under the British rule and were not about to allow foreign influences to take over the sovereignty of the new nation. When the country gained independence, the world was becoming divided into two opposing camps of the United States and the Soviet Union. Newly independent nations were put under tremendous pressure to take sides one way or the other. But India refused to take this binary decision and wanted to chart an independent course which would enable it to protect its national interests without being drawn into the Cold War opposition.

Non-alignment was a moral as well as strategic imperative for Nehru. In the moral sense it was anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and anti-power politics. Strategically, it gave India the choice of avoiding military alliances and engaging in diplomatic talks with all countries. Non-alignment was not the same as neutrality or isolation, however. Rather, it was an indication of engagement in international affairs with the liberty to assess every issue on its own merits. This became an integral part of the identity of India in international politics and also influenced the foreign perception of India in the Cold War era (Ranjan, 2025).

This vision was an important part of the institutionalization process at the Bandung Conference in 1955. Nehru was among leaders like Josip Broz Tito, Sukarno and Gamal Abdel Nasser, who were promoting solidarity among newly decolonized nations. All this led to the creation in 1961 of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India wanted to establish a joint platform with the help of NAM and enable countries to remain independent from both the superpower blocks. The movement focused on sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, development and international cooperation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, non-alignment helped India to obtain economic and military aid from both the East and the West without formally aligning with either. The balanced approach enabled India to move forward towards national development without compromising on her diplomacy. But the actual operation of non-alignment was not devoid of problems. Security fears,

mainly stemming from the India-China war in 1962 and the border wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, led India to make pragmatically pragmatic decisions sometimes contradicting the policy of strict neutrality.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, 1971 is an example of this complexity. The treaty was essentially a strategic alliance between India and the Soviet Union at a time when there was an increased geopolitical tension in the region, despite the nation's continued non-alignment stance. Some critics said that it was against the principles of non-alignment while some supporters said that this policy has always been for national interest and not for maintaining ideology. This debate underscored the fact that non-alignment was never an "unchangeable principle" or a "static policy" but rather a "flexible policy" that aimed at keeping the countries "indomitable" in the face of shifting situations (Pant & Super, 2015).

The end of the Cold War radically changed the international setting in which non-alignment had been acting. In 1991, the end of the Soviet Union brought an end to the bipolar system of global politics that had prevailed for almost five decades. Meanwhile, India has also been gripped by a serious economic crisis which led to broad economic reforms and increased participation in the international economy. The developments opened new opportunities but also showed the shortcomings of the conventional non-alignment.

The rapid pace of globalization made India's foreign policy agenda broader than just security, encompassing the areas of trade, technology, investment, energy security and economic growth. The international situation had evolved in such a way that a more flexible framework was needed, one that could deal with several challenges at once. As a result, the ideals of non-alignment drifted away from the rhetoric and remained committed to the ideals of strategic independence.

During this period the notion of strategic autonomy came into the picture as a more appropriate one for the post-Cold War era. Strategic autonomy is not a condition of being equidistant from all major powers. Instead, it focuses on the capacity of state to take autonomous decisions and to relate "selectively" to various actors depending on its interests. It is an approach that takes into consideration the nature of the world that is interconnected, meaning that cooperation and partnerships are needed and must not be at the cost of the loss of national sovereignty (Tikerpuu, 2018).

The advent of China further promoted this change. As China rapidly expanded its economic, military and regional power, it brought new strategic concerns to India. China's fast economic development, military modernization and growing influence in the region created new concerns for India. China's rising influence led to a growing awareness of the need for partnerships to help to balance that influence. However, India was not keen on formal pacts, and instead built a multitude of connections which would guarantee a measure of freedom of action. Pant and Super (2015) argue that the Indian reaction to China's rise evidences the continuity between non-alignment and strategic autonomy; both are looking to ensure maximum policy flexibility and not excessive reliance on external powers.

Strategic autonomy became the hallmark of the Indian foreign policy in the twenty first century. This was adopted by the successive governments, irrespective of their ideologies. Cooperation in areas like defence, technology, trade and maritime security grew significantly through strategic partnership with the United States. Meanwhile, India enjoyed robust ties with Russia, strengthened links with Europe and Japan, close relations with the Gulf nations and co-operation with Africa and other countries in the Southeast Asian region.

India's engagement in various multilateral fora demonstrates the application of strategic autonomy. It has been an active member of the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

(SCO), the G20 and the Quad group. Some of these institutions are in competition with each other as different geopolitical visions, but India is involved in all of them at the same time. It is a "multidirectional" diplomacy, in that it aims to increase strategic options instead of narrow them down to one bloc. This has been described by scholars as a multi-alignment strategy, which is an additional tool to strategic autonomy and is aimed at spreading partnerships and decreasing reliance on any given power centre.

This has been further extended by the Modi administration. Some observers thought India would be abandoning its traditional foreign policy ideology; however, in the modern dias, there is much continuity to earlier foreign policy goals. The biggest disparity is that India is more assertive and confident in its actions for its interests. India is no longer on the sidelines of international politics, it is actively influencing the international agenda and institutions. Over time, strategic autonomy has shifted from a defensive posture designed to maintain sovereignty to a proactive approach to strengthening influence and leadership in the world.

A key element of this shift is India's re-entry into the Global South. Historical obligations of postcolonial solidarity continue to shape foreign policy as with contemporary efforts like the Voice of Global South Summit. Unlike the Cold War days, however, India's leadership aspirations today have a greater economic and diplomatic basis. India's strategic autonomy enables it to represent the interests of developing countries while simultaneously communicating with big powers on key issues such as trade, security, technology and climate change. This is their policy as it brings together the historical ideals with the modern approach to pragmatism (Ranjan, 2025).

This transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy is thus a continuity in the context of a change. The two methods are based on the principle of maintaining independence and excluding external domination. Differences are mostly in the approach to the goals. Non-alignment was born in a bipolar world of the cold war and strategic autonomy has been created in a multipolar environment. Through the evolution of its foreign policy, India has made adjustments to reflect the evolving international landscape to ensure strategic flexibility and to build its international influence.

Strategic autonomy continues to be a part of India's foreign policy agenda today. It allows the country to maneuver the growing rivalry of great powers, national development goals, and the promotion of the concerns of the Global South. The on-going process of evolution of the international system will probably continue to be one of the most significant aspects of India's foreign policy in the future, and the struggle for autonomy will be one of the most salient of them.

India and the Global South: Reclaiming Leadership in the Twenty-First Century is an edited volume. Reclaiming Leadership in the Twenty-First Century: India and the Global South is an edited book.

The term "Global South" has regained importance in today's world of international relations. The concept was originally coined to refer to the nations of the developing world, which shared colonial histories, dependency and political marginalisation, but has since expanded to encompass the idea of inequalities in the global order. The Global South is a highly diverse group of countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and parts of Oceania that are pursuing a fairer deal for themselves and greater representation and a stronger voice in global governance. In this regard, India has become one of the most prominent voice of the Global South.

India's engagement with the Global South has a strong historical foundation. Indian foreign policy after independence was focused on "anti-colonial solidarity", "sovereign equality" and "support for newly independent nations. India always spoke up for the developing nations through its involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Group of 77 (G-77) and the

United Nations bodies. These were an expression of ideology as well as strategy, with India wanting to establish international alliances without being dominated by the big powers (Narlikar, 2022).

The perceived decline of the Cold War reduced the importance of South-South cooperation at the beginning. At the start, the end of the Cold War seemed to make South-South cooperation seem less relevant. Globalisation, economic liberalisation, and a spread of western-inspired institutions turned focus on integration into the global economy instead of an act of collective political mobilisation within the developing world. Economic disparities, unequal access to technology, climate vulnerabilities and weak representation in global institutions, however, brought back the call for a more inclusive international order. This was a turning point in India's efforts to project its leadership role in the Global South (Acharya, 2017).

India has gained a significant boost in credibility among the developing countries with its rapid economic growth as one of the fastest growing economies of the world. India has common experiences with other countries of the Global South with regard to colonialism and developmental issues unlike many traditional powers. Meanwhile, its economic development, technological prowess and growing international presence gives it greater leverage in taking on world problems. This is a rare combination that can help India portray itself as a representative of developing countries and as an emerging global power.

One of the key aspects of India's modern-day Global South diplomacy is its focus on partnership, not patronage. Principles like mutual respect, local ownership, and demand-driven development are often cited by Indian policy makers. This is in contrast to donor-recipient relations, which are more common in north-south relations. India has tried to build long-term partnerships in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific Islands through various development cooperation programmes, technical assistance programmes, educational exchanges, and capacity building programmes (Mawdsley, 2018). Africa is a significant region in India's interactions with the Global South. Relations between India and African countries have been strengthened by historical ties, common colonial past, and growth of economic interactions. India has made huge investments in infrastructure, health, education, information technology and agriculture cooperation within the continent. India-Africa Forum Summit has created an institutional mechanism for further political and economic cooperation. The programmes not only help in achieving developmental goals but also enhance India's foreign policy presence in multilateral platforms (Vines & Oruitemeka, 2020).

The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme has brought India's development partnership model to the fore. Since 1964, ITEC has educated hundreds of thousands of professionals and experts from developing countries in various disciplines including information technology, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and public administration. The programs are indicative of the Indian approach of capacity development and knowledge sharing as instruments of engagement. India is keen to develop sustainable partnerships through a focus on human resource development, which can support long-term development outcomes.

The Covid-19 pandemic was an opportunity to showcase the Indian commitment of solidarity with the Global South. India's generosity in providing medicines and vaccines to various developing nations, including the Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, during the crisis is a testament to its level of assistance. Indonesia's efforts to provide medical assistance and medicines to many developing countries, including the Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, during the crisis stand as a testament to its level of support. India, in the midst of its own challenges, emerged as a responsible stakeholder, dedicated to

collective welfare. Vaccine diplomacy boosted India's image and confidence in its leadership among various developing countries (Basu, 2022).

Another space in which India has been trying to voice Global South concerns is climate change. Developing countries often claim that industrialised countries have taken greater responsibility for environmental degradation in the past and are thus more responsible to support climate adaptation and mitigation in developing countries through financial and technological means. India has always stressed on the concept of "common but differentiated responsibilities" by referring to it in all the international climate change negotiations. This position is particularly attractive to a number of Global South countries with high climate risks but who are responsible for only a comparatively small share of global emissions (Dubash, 2023).

India's demands for climate justice are in line with concerns for fairness in the international system. It also makes similar claims with regards to trade, intellectual property rights, digital governance and development finance. In all these fields India demands reforms that will give more opportunities and representation to the developing countries. A role like that enhances its credentials as a representative for the interests of the Global South and it also helps in the pursuit of national goals.

The 2023 Global South Summit and its sequel were an important step in India's recent drive in Global South diplomacy. The initiative aimed to develop a forum to represent the shared concerns and concerns of developing nations to the international decision-making bodies. Topics covered included food security, access to energy, debt levels, digital divide, health care, and sustainable development. India's hosting of a big number of developing countries, strengthened India's dreams as a bridge between the Global South and large global institutions (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

This image was further reinforced by India's G20 Presidency. India highlighted inclusive growth, sustainable development, Digital Public Infrastructure and issues of developing economies under the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future". The most important of all the outcomes of the summit was the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20. This was seen as a positive sign of global governance structures being expanded to include more representation from the Global South, and a sign of India's commitment to the cause of its representation (Jaishankar, 2024).

Concurrently, India's desire for leadership is not trouble-free. The "Global South" is not a uniform entity. It is a collection of nations with varying political systems, economies, security issues and development agendas. Therefore, reaching consensus within such a wide range of people is very challenging. The concerns that countries may have on inequality and representation may differ from one another, even though they have some shared concerns. The sustainability of India's leadership then lies in its ability to be accommodating to varying interests and in its credibility in multiple geographies.

Another problem is that of competition with other emerging powers, especially China. China has built up a strong presence in the developing world by means of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) amongst others. Many countries have embraced the Chinese investment, but such worries as debt sustainability, transparency, and strategic dependence have also surfaced. India offers a more consultative and sustainable approach to development partnership. However, competition for influence in the Global South is still a central aspect of modern geopolitics (Pant, 2023).

Additionally, people need to see results in their expectations of leadership. Rhetoric is not enough to maintain influence. There is growing demand in developing countries for tangible collaboration in the fields of infrastructure, technology transfer, health care, education, climate adaptation and economic

development. Such expectations will have a significant impact on the image of India's leadership in the near future.

Yet, none of these constraints have weakened India's position in the Global South to the extent that it was ever in its history. It has become one of the world's most prosperous countries, technologically advanced, democratic and has gained greater international respect. Equally important, India is a country which has a key position in being able to work with major powers while at the same time maintaining a strong sense of history and politics with developing countries. It offers a great strength in this world of geopolitical fragmentation and the need for more inclusive global governance.

Global South politics has caused a comeback, and India can now influence international discourses and institutions. India has attempted to shift its role from a stakeholder in Global South initiatives to becoming one of its leading carvers. The country has been trying to make a transition from being a stakeholder to one of the major shapers of the Global South initiatives, by leveraging historical legitimacy and evolving material capabilities. It does so not only to serve the interests of developing countries, but also to consolidate its role as a key player in the new multipolar world order.

In the emerging multipolar world order, India has to be a strategically autonomous state in terms of its foreign policy. In the emerging multipolar world order, India must become a strategically autonomous country in the field of foreign policy.

The strategic landscape in which states design and craft their foreign policy has been radically changed by the rise of a multipolar world order. The current international political landscape is far from bipolar, like the Cold War era, or unipolar, like the post-Soviet era, but displays multipolarity, a spread-out distribution of power among a number of actors. The United States is still a great power, but as China emerges and Russia has recovered, regional groups have grown in importance, and middle powers have increased in significance as well. The current geopolitical reality is one of change, and India has taken up a policy of strategic autonomy as the guiding principle of its foreign policy engagements.

Strategic autonomy is sometimes referred to as the capacity of a state to act in accordance with its national interests without becoming overly dependent on any particular actors, but still being able to work with a variety of them. Unlike non-alignment, strategic autonomy is not a rejection of it, but a development of it for India. Strategic autonomy aims to empower India's sovereignty within a much more complex and multipolar international landscape as compared to the Cold War era, when the concept of non-alignment was developed (Pant & Joshi, 2019).

The modern international system offers opportunities as well as challenges to India. However, on the other hand, multipolarity opens up more room for the growth of diplomatic power for emerging powers. Having more centres of influence gives states like India more choices of who to partner with and more leverage to negotiate with them and make them less dependent on any one. Rivalry, on the other hand, will push countries to join the competing geopolitical groups. Indian foreign policy has thus always aimed at keeping strategic options open while ensuring that both opportunities for economic progress and technological development and security cooperation are maximised.

The best example of strategic independence is the India-US relations. The best example of strategic autonomy is India - USA relations. Bilateral relations have since grown significantly in various areas, especially in the defence and education fields, as well as in trade, technology and energy. Signing of India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008 was a major milestone, denoting increasing trust and cooperation between the two nations. Recent times have seen greater cooperation between countries in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, under the broad rubric of maritime security,



supply chain resilience, and critical technologies, disaster response (Madan, 2020).

In spite of this close cooperation, the United States and India have never formally signed an alliance. Indian policy makers are wary of any deal that might restrict policy sovereignty and impose a commitment that is not aligned with the country's interests. This reluctance stems from the continued importance of the principle of strategic autonomy. While India's ties with Washington are growing, it still maintains that foreign policies are hinges on India's national priorities and not on commitments made to allies (Jaishankar, 2020).

Meanwhile, India has been keeping close contact with Russia, which has been a cornerstone of its strategic partnership for ages. Russia is also a major source of defence equipment and has continued to be a key part of India's defence architecture. Especially, the Russia-Ukraine conflict created a difficult situation for India to test its strategic autonomy. Most of the western nations had hoped that New Delhi would have taken a more critical attitude towards Moscow, but New Delhi had taken a balanced approach. It reiterated its support for dialogue and peaceful resolution, without outright condemnation. India's stance was indicative of its interest in continuing its traditional ties with Russia and its close relationship with western powers (Kumar, 2025).

India's dealings with China is a far more complicated question. China's emergence has changed the power dynamics in the Asia and created many strategic worries for India. Historically, border tensions, regional power struggle, and divergent ideas of regional stability have added to the mixed picture of the relationship between the two states. The confrontation in the East Ladakh region in 2020 severely impacted bilateral relations and heightened concerns about China's strategic intentions. However, India persists in trying to engage China through diplomatic means, economic trade and multilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Tellis, 2022).

Competition and engagement are the two aspects to the dual approach, a practical application of strategic autonomy. India does not want to engage in head-on conflict or in complete harmony; it wants to deal with difference and yet keep one's interests. This way, New Delhi can save a lot of trouble without any unnecessary escalation and still have space to diplomatically engage when it is needed.

India's involvement in several and sometimes conflicting international institutions also reflects its aim of strategic autonomy. India's willingness to cooperate on issues as opposed to politics is reflected in its membership in groups such as BRICS, the SCO, the G20 and many other regional groupings. The platforms have been created for different purposes. The BRICS is a forum for cooperation between emerging economies, the SCO a forum for security issues in the region, the Quad a path to stability in the Indo-Pacific region and the G20 a platform for dialogue with developed and developing economies. India does not see these as siloed initiatives for the sake of national interest but as complementary tools.

The economic dimension has grown in significance too in the quest for strategic autonomy in India. Thanks to the country's rapid economic growth, its foreign influence and foreign policy has improved both. It is widely accepted that economic power is a key factor in ensuring strategic independence, as it makes a country less vulnerable to pressure from outside and makes it more resilient. As a result, India has been increasingly focusing on diversifying its trade, attracting investment, fostering technological collaboration, and ensuring supply chain security. The government's initiatives like "Make in India," "Digital India," and the concept of self-reliance "Atmanirbhar Bharat" show that it is seeking to boost its own capacity while maintaining its engagement with the rest of the world (Nayar, 2021).

Another key area of implementation of strategic autonomy is the Indo-Pacific region. India has been trying to strike a balance between security and economic opportunities in this region as geopolitical competition increases. India has ensured there has been no mention of an explicit containment policy against China, even though it is advocating a free, open and inclusive Indo Pacific. Rather, it is focused on principles of respect for sovereignty, freedom of navigation, respect for international law and peaceful dispute settlement. This will allow India to work with its like-minded partners, while leaving policy room for maneuver. (Brewster, 2018)

Technological sovereignty is yet another aspect of strategic autonomy that India is slowly moving towards. Technology competition is a key dimension of international politics today, and mastery of key technologies inevitably goes hand in hand with national power. India has thus made significant investments in fields like digital infrastructure, AI, semiconductor manufacturing, cybersecurity, and space technology. Having multiple partnership with different countries enables India to get access to innovation and investment resources, as well as decrease the reliance on a single technological ecosystem.

The concept of strategic autonomy also influences India's approach to global governance. India wants a multipolar international order as it gives more room for independent action and wider stake in decision making processes. One of the frequent claims made by the Indian policy makers is that the institutions are not fit for the current realities, and the emerging economies need to be represented better. There is a strong connection between calls for reform of the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and India's larger vision of a more balanced and inclusive world order (Tharoor, 2021).

However, there are a few obstacles to strategic autonomy. As the gap between U.S. and Chinese competition increases, it will be difficult for middle powers to keep maintaining a balance between the two. However, economic interdependence can also make policy more inflexible because of vulnerabilities that are created. In addition, India has ambitious plans to strive for a more prominent role in the international sphere, necessitating significant economic, military, and diplomatic strength. Balancing competing priorities and maintaining autonomy will thus continue to be a complex affair.

There has been a tendency in the past to criticize strategic autonomy as an unclear concept, because it leaves room for interpretation of national interests by the policy makers. Some argue that too much autonomy can be a problem in achieving deeper partnerships with strategic partners. But backers believe that that's exactly what makes the idea strong. The flexibility to adjust to the changing scenario without being bound by any concrete commitment is considered as a key strength in an unpredictable international environment (Pant & Joshi, 2019).

In a nutshell, strategic autonomy is the hallmark of India's foreign policy in the 21st century. It helps India maneuver in a rapidly evolving international system, develop a variety of partnerships and pursue national interests without giving up its independence. Given India's quest for strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world and its desire to navigate the competing pressures, expand its reach in international politics and play a more responsible role in shaping a more inclusive international order, strategic autonomy is likely to be a key factor in how India will maintain its balance in the future.

#### **India: A Bridge between the Global South and Global North – Opportunities, Challenges and Future prospects**

It is a rare opportunity for India to emerge as a mediator between the Global South and Global North, shaped by international political dynamics. India has features that enable it to interact with developed and developing nations to the extent

that other emerging powers don't. It has gained legitimacy within the Global South by a long track record of colonial experiences, its deep engagement with South-South cooperation and its advocacy for the issues of developing countries. At the same time, its development, technology and its democratic system and development of strategic partnerships with advanced economies have reduced its taboo status for countries of the Global North. This umbrella of both identities has made it one of the key assets of India's foreign policy in the evolving multipolar world order.

The idea of India as a bridge between the Global South and the Global North is intertwined with the larger changes in the system of global governance. The international institutions that currently work are mostly post-Second World War creations based on the distribution of power at that time, not the current one. In many developing countries, they claim that the existing governance systems do not adequately represent their interests and influence. Consequently, the calls for reforms to establish a representative and equitable international system are growing. India has been consistently pushing these demands, and at the same time is constructively interacting with major powers and institutions (Acharya, 2017).

Partly, India's engagement of both groups is the result of its developmental trajectory. India is still grappling with the problems of poverty, inequality, inadequate infrastructure and climate risks that are characteristic of advanced industrialized nations. Such realities give the Indian policy-makers an insight into the issues raised by the developing countries and make it easier for them to voice their concerns. Meanwhile, the economic, technological and internationalisation developments of India have made it a more important voice in the international system than ever before. It is a sort of developmental experience and a maturing of power that gives India a distinctive set of foreign policy lenses that apply to various regions and political situations (Mohan 2023).

One of the most conspicuous aspects of the bridging role of India has been its interaction with world governance bodies. As a part of its G20 presidency, India wanted to focus on the issues of developing countries in the international discourse. Food security, energy access, debt distress, digital inclusion, climate finance and sustainable development were all topics of great importance. These themes represented an attempt by India to make sure the agendas of developing countries did not get lost in the geopolitical competition among the great powers. The successful admission of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 was interpreted as a major step towards the greater representation of the Global South in the international decision-making process (Jaishankar, 2024).

India has also been trying to fill the gaps in the field of climate governance. Climate change is one of the most complex topics in international politics today, where there are conflicting needs for technological advancement, ecological conservation and accountability for past acts. Historical responsibility for GHE is often cited as a justification for having industrial countries take a bigger share of the burden in the developing countries. Developed countries, on the other hand, stress the importance of global collective action to solve global environmental problems.

India has been trying to balance these views, seeking climate justice and, at the same time, promoting cooperation on an international scale. It is also supporting renewable energy projects, such as those under the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which have a developmental dimension. Launched by India and France in tandem, the ISA is now becoming a significant platform in the promotion of energy solutions that are sustainable, particularly in developing nations. Such measures reflect India's desire to show that it is possible to provide economic growth and environmental responsibility hand-in-hand (Dubash, 2023).

Digital governance is another vital aspect of India's bridging role. The explosion of digital technology has brought with it new

opportunities for economy growth, but also raised questions about inequality, data governance, and technological dependence. The success of India's efforts in building large-scale digital public infrastructure has garnered global attention. Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI) etc., and the digital delivery of services are being seen as models that could be replicated in other developing countries.

India has emerged as a hub for technology cooperation and inclusivity by sharing its expertise and fostering digital collaboration. Meanwhile, it is an active member in global forums on data governance, cyber security, artificial intelligence and digital trade. It is a two-way process, which allows India to play a role in defining emerging norms and ensures the voices of developing countries are heard (Narlikar, 2022).

The Indian position as a bridge is also clearly evident in the area of economic diplomacy. The modernised global economy is inherently interdependent but also more fragmented due to geopolitical tensions, trade conflict and supply chain disruptions. India has been trying to strike a balance between positive economic ties with developed and developing countries. It has trading relationships with North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Latin America. This wide participation will promote India's role in advancing dialogue and cooperation among the various economic zones.

In addition, India's presence in important events like BRICS reflects its openness to a new basket of economic cooperation alongside its involvement in traditional institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. India does not generally call for replacing the existing structures but calls for reform and adaptation. This pragmatic perspective strengthens its legitimacy as an actor that can construct consensus among a range of actors (Stuenkel, 2017).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought out the opportunities and challenges of India's role as a middle power. Many western countries had strong sanctions against Russia, India had more subtle stance. It stood for dialogue, diplomacy, peaceful resolution and for relations with all parties. While this was criticized by some circles, it also showed India's resolve to pursue strategic autonomy and ensure that its communications remained open and do not break through geopolitical barriers. These actions reflect India's attempt to play a balancing act between different blocks of nations without being fully part of one (Pant, 2023).

Notwithstanding its advantages, India's ambition to act as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South is beset with numerous challenges. In fact, one of the challenges is the growing polarization in international politics. The strategic space of middle powers is narrowing in the face of increased competition between the United States and China. The competition increases and it is harder to keep in balance with several actors. India could find itself increasingly forced to choose sides on sensitive geopolitical matters, which may make it more difficult for it to play a mediation role.

The second challenge is related to expectations from the Global South. India is seen as a potential leader and champion of the cause by many developing countries. But diplomacy is not enough for leadership, though. It calls for concrete action from countries in sectors like finance for development, investment in infrastructure, technology transfer, collaboration in health care, adaptation to climate change, etc. The country's capacity to deliver these expectations will have a considerable impact on its credibility and influence in the Global south (Mawdsley, 2018).

Thirdly, domestic issues can have an impact on India's foreign goals. Economic growth, poverty alleviation, investment in infrastructure and the environment are critical national issues. India's ability to exert its influence outside its boundaries is tied to its efforts to tackle these domestic challenges. Good local leadership is key to good international leadership.

Yet, the opportunities for India are still significant. It has a good foundation of demographic benefits, technological advancements, economic expansion and growing diplomatic engagements to support its influence in future. Furthermore, there is a rising demand for inclusive global governance which is in line with the Indian vision of a more representative global governance arrangement. In a changing world of traditional power, those that can bridge the gaps of political, economic and ideological differences will have a more significant role.

The future of India's influence will hinge on its ability to make strategic autonomy translate into constructive leadership. This involves not only presenting a coherent national agenda, but presenting a credible alternative to developing countries, while appealing to advanced nations, and providing actionable solutions to common international issues. In the success, India may become one of the leading agents of change towards a multipolar system that would work more inclusively, cooperatively and representatively.

India's current foreign policy in many ways is an attempt to balance its past with its future. It is anti-colonialist in its approach to the Global South and developmental in its interactions with the big powers, and these are connected to its desire to become more influential in the world. These two aspects are being linked by India, which not only wants to improve its own international position, but also help to create a more balanced and equitable world order. Its success will define India's role in the world as well as the future course of multipolarity in the twenty first century.

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The shift in India's foreign policy from "non-alignment" to "strategic autonomy" is one of the most remarkable events in the field of international relations in modern history. While the world has undergone a sea change since its independence, the core of India's philosophy of maintaining national sovereignty and independent decision making is almost unchanged. The way to achieve this objective has changed over time. Non-alignment is the product of bipolarity of the Cold War, while strategic autonomy is born out of the multipolar and increasingly interconnected world.

The study has established that there is continuity and change in India's foreign policy. Non-alignment helped India to remain strategically flexible and to serve the cause of decolonization and of peaceful co-existence and the cause of the new states during the Cold war. The policy enabled India to maintain an independent military stance and to be free from formal alliances. But the changes in the Soviet Union, the economic globalisation, new technologies and new geopolitical realities required a new foreign policy consideration of traditional foreign policy methods. Within this evolving scenario, strategic autonomy was born as a more pragmatic and flexible structure that allows multiple partnerships without losing the national interest (Pant & Super, 2015).

One of the most important findings of the study is that the concept of strategic autonomy is not necessarily antagonistic to the concept of non-alignment. One of the key findings of the study is that strategic autonomy does not mean non-alignment. Instead, it is its modern-day interpretation. There is a general agreement that sovereignty, policy independence and opposition to external domination are the core tenets of both doctrines. The main difference is that international engagement is different. Non-alignment was about keeping distance from competing blocs and strategic autonomy about playing with several actors at the same time. This development is in tune with the realities of an interdependent world, where technological cooperation and transnational challenges necessitate greater international engagement, and economic interdependence (Jaishankar, 2020).

The paper has also emphasised the rising importance of India as a player in the 'Global South'. In past years, India was one of the

strongest voices in favour of decolonisation, sovereign equality and economic justice. These pledges remain alive in its current foreign policy. India has made efforts to resurgent its leadership among the developing countries through various activities including Voice of Global South Summit, development partnerships in Africa and Asia, climate justice advocacy, and institutional reforms. While India's current interactions with the Global South are, of course, driven by significant economic development, technological advances and growing diplomatic clout, they are not as rooted in political ideology as the previous ones during the Cold War era.

India's historical and developmental experience is unique, which gives it a special position in the Global South. It is a relatively poor, under-developed nation facing problems of poverty, infrastructure, and social inequality, but also one of the world's largest economies and a major technological power. This double identity helps the Indian state to grasp the problems of any developing nation, but at the same time enables it to deal with the major powers as it is a more and more powerful international player. This gives India a unique position in today's international politics to represent the Global South and play an active role in the decision-making process at the international level (Acharya, 2017).

With the development of multipolarity, India's strategic value has been further accentuated. Global power is increasingly diffused and shared among actors, which has increased the opportunities of middle and emerging powers to affect global affairs. India has successfully done so to build a diversified partnership and strengthened its diplomatic outreach in this environment. Its simultaneous involvement in both the United States and Russia, with its engagement with the European Union, Japan, the Asian Association of Nations, Africa and the Gulf region are good examples of how strategic autonomy is being practically followed. India's inclination towards multi-directional engagement instead of alignment with any particular bloc is reflected in its membership in institutions like Quad, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and BRICS (Mukherjee, 2023).

However, the study also has highlighted some difficulties which can impact India's trajectory. The most prominent risk is that the rivalry between the United States and China in geopolitics is growing more intense. With these two powers growing competitive, a balance between the two might be more difficult to achieve. Diplomatic space is crucial for strategic autonomy, and over-polarization may limit the room that India currently has.

A second one relates to the disconnect between leadership aspirations and actual means. Despite rapid growth of the Indian economy, there are still plenty of challenges to development. National priorities remain subject to infrastructure shortages, social inequities, environmental pressures and technological dependencies. Therefore, India's future growth and strengthening of its institutions will be crucial in supporting its growing ambitions in the international arena.

Thirdly, the expectations of global south leadership call into action. Developing countries are increasingly looking for concrete assistance in the fields of development financing, health care, education, digital connection, climate adaptation and technological cooperation. The success of India's diplomatic efforts will not only rely on diplomacy, but on the delivery of concrete benefits to partner countries as well (Mawdsley, 2018).

Still another difficulty is competition from other up and coming powers, particularly China. China has extended its reach in economy and politics through massive projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the rest of the developing world. India has an alternative partnership approach of consultation, ownership and capacity-building. This alternative will require large investment and long-term commitment, however.

In the face of these challenges, India has very good prospects. Relative strengths in demography, technology, digital



transformation, diplomacy, and international visibility ensure a solid position to exert influence on the future. Furthermore, the world's demand for a more inclusive and participatory governance structure is well aligned with India's longstanding advocacy for change. With the ongoing conversations on representation, equality and legitimacy in international politics, India's influence is expected to grow further.

### Policy Recommendations

This study suggests some policy recommendations to enhance India's position in the new multipolar world order.

Enhance the economic basis for strategic autonomy

The primary source of international influence is still economic power. In India, there is a need to keep following policies to support sustainable economic growth, industrial modernization, technological innovation, and infrastructure development. Significant increases in R&D, advanced manufacturing, digital infrastructure and renewable energy investments will mitigate vulnerabilities and improve strategic independence. With a more solid footing for economic growth, India will have greater confidence and credibility in its foreign policy pursuits (Nayar, 2021).

### Increase involvement in the Global South

India must institutionalize the development partnerships in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, and adoption of initiatives like the Voice of Global South Summit. Greater collaboration between governments in the medical field, education, agriculture, climate adaptation, digital infrastructure and capacity development would enhance the leadership capabilities of India. This engagement should focus on the partnerships, mutual respect and local ownership, not dependency.

### Improve Leadership for Global Governance Reform

India must persist in advocating changes in the international institutions, especially the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Partnerships with other emerging economies and developing countries could also strengthen larger coalitions to achieve institutional change. India's contribution to the successful support of African Union membership in the G20 showcases its potential for increasing representation in global governance structures (Jaishankar, 2024).

Keep balanced relations with the big powers

In order to be strategic autonomous, partnerships must be diversified. India should continue to build up ties with the United States, Europe, Japan and other democratic nations, while holding on to positive engagement with Russia and effective communication with China. This is a balanced approach that will enhance the flexibility of diplomatic engagements and lessen the reliance on one single entity.

### Promote Technological Sovereignty

India must focus on investments in core technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Semiconductors, Cybersecurity, Quantum Computing and Space Technology in the technologically competitive age of today. It will reinforce economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy through the development of innovation capacities at home and partnerships with technology abroad.

Develop Leadership in Climate and Sustainable Development

Climate change is a great challenge for India and for the rest of the Global South. India must keep pushing climate justice and encourage cooperation in renewable energy and sustainable development. International Solar Alliance (ISA) is one of the programmes in which India can showcase its leadership on global environmental issues (Dubash, 2023).

### Boost Regional Connectivity and Cooperation

India's presence in the world is tightly coupled to its presence in the region. South Asian and Indian Ocean connectivity initiatives, trade and developmental cooperation will further empower India as a regional leader. Regional integration can also provide strategic resilience and contribute to economic growth.

### Final Reflection

India's transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy is a testament to its adaptability, resilience, and ambition. The international scenario has undergone a radical transformation since independence but the spirit of sovereign decision-making is intact in India. Through strategic autonomy, the nation has not only managed to steer clear of the geopolitical competition, but has also extended its global partnerships, and reinforced its position as a voice of the Global South.

In an increasingly multipolar world, India is poised to play a greater role. It has the unique capacity to link the developed and the developing worlds, to reconcile conflicting interests, and to promote more participatory forms of governance, making it a key player in the international politics of the twenty first century. It is the ability of Indian foreign policy to balance its national interest with its global obligations that will ultimately be the key to success. In the long run, strategic autonomy can make India a major power as well as help build a more equitable, representative and cooperative international order if it is managed well.

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