

INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY AND ITS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE USA

SALONI SONDHI

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Sanatan Dharam College, Ambala Cantt

ABSTRACT

India's multi-alignment strategy has emerged as a defining feature of its contemporary foreign policy, reflecting a measured response to increasing geopolitical uncertainty and the diffusion of power in the international system. Departing from the binaries of alliance and non-alignment, multi-alignment enables India to pursue simultaneous, issue-based partnerships with multiple major powers while retaining strategic autonomy. This paper examines India's engagement with the United States through the lens of multi-alignment, arguing that cooperation with Washington represents a pragmatic choice rather than a departure from India's long-standing emphasis on strategic autonomy. While India and the United States share growing convergence in areas such as the Indo-Pacific, defense cooperation, technology partnerships, and maritime security, their relationship continues to be shaped by structural asymmetries and divergent national priorities. By examining multi-alignment through the prism of a shifting multipolar order, the paper contends that India's foreign policy is increasingly driven by strategic flexibility and interest maximization rather than ideological alignment. The study analyses how India balances deepening ties with the United States alongside sustained engagement with other major powers, including Russia and China, as well as its leading role in the Global South. It highlights that India's multi-alignment strategy enables issue-based cooperation with the United States while preserving policy flexibility in areas of disagreement, such as trade, human rights, and relations with third countries. By situating India-US relations within the broader context of a transitioning multipolar order, the paper contends that multi-alignment has emerged as a strategic instrument to maximize national interests rather than an ideological shift in India's foreign policy orientation. The paper concludes that India's engagement with the United States under multi-alignment is likely to remain selective, interest-driven, and adaptive and that multi-alignment functions as a stabilizing and adaptive foreign policy strategy, enabling India to enhance its global influence.

Keywords: multi-alignment; india's foreign policy; strategic autonomy; multipolar world order; security first doctrine; atmanirbhar bharat.

INTRODUCTION

Multi-alignment constitutes a significant evolution of India's foreign policy beyond the traditional framework of non-alignment, providing greater strategic flexibility in the pursuit of national interests. Unlike non-alignment, which was often interpreted as passive neutrality, multi-alignment is an active and adaptive strategy that enables India to pursue issue-based partnerships across competing power centers. Through this approach, India seeks to leverage geopolitical rivalries to enhance its economic,

diplomatic, and security outcomes. Multi-alignment has allowed India to sustain long-standing defense cooperation with Russia while simultaneously expanding its strategic partnership with the United States; to engage China selectively on economic and multilateral platforms while deepening security cooperation with Japan and Australia; and to balance its relations with Iran and Israel while maintaining robust ties with Gulf Arab states. In the shifting landscape of 21st-century geopolitics, India has transitioned from its traditional doctrine of Non-Alignment to a sophisticated strategy of Multi-Alignment. This approach, often characterized as "principled pragmatism," seeks to maximize India's strategic autonomy by cultivating simultaneous, issue-based partnerships with competing global powers. At the heart of this strategy lies India's complex engagement with the United States, a relationship that has evolved from Cold War-era "estrangement" to a "comprehensive global strategic partnership." While New Delhi views Washington as an indispensable partner for defense modernization, technological advancement, and counterbalancing a rising China in the Indo-Pacific, it simultaneously maintains robust ties with Russia and champions a multipolar world through forums like BRICS and the SCO. This research paper examines the delicate balancing act inherent in India's foreign policy, exploring how India navigates the friction between its deepening U.S. ties and its commitment to strategic autonomy.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF U.S. - INDIA RELATIONS

The geopolitical journey between Washington and New Delhi has followed a remarkable and often turbulent trajectory. Throughout the Cold War, the two nations were frequently characterized as "estranged democracies," separated by divergent ideological frameworks and strategic priorities. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India maintained a persistent skepticism toward American influence, particularly regarding the perceived risks of economic dependency (McMahon, 1994). This friction was exacerbated by the Cold War security architecture, in which Pakistan's status as a primary recipient of U.S. military aid created deep-seated resentment within the Indian establishment. The dissolution of the Soviet Union forced a pragmatic recalibration of India's foreign policy. Faced with a severe balance-of-payments crisis in the early 1990s, India was incentivized to liberalize its economy and seek closer integration with Western markets. However, this nascent rapprochement faced a significant setback following India's 1998 nuclear tests. The ensuing U.S.-led economic sanctions and diplomatic censures at the United Nations underscored a profound "crisis of trust" (Chaudhuri, 2014). In the current scenario, with the return of Donald Trump in 2025, there were expectations that India and US relations would get a reset, but in August 2025 the United States imposed 50 per cent tariffs on India for its trade imbalance and purchase of Russian crude.

The Strategic Framework: From iCET to TRUST

The India-US Strategic Partnership has undergone a tectonic shift, moving from hesitant engagement to a "trusted" alliance anchored by the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET). In 2025, the Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) initiative was signed. This serves as the operational arm of iCET, specifically focusing on supply chain resilience. TRUST shifts the India-US relationship from high-level policy discussions to industrial execution. Its primary goal is to build "trusted ecosystems" that decouple critical supply chains from adversarial influences. This initiative has resulted in several high yielding outcomes. The launch of the Shakti

Semiconductor Fab, focusing on gallium nitride (GaN) for defense and 6G infrastructure, and India's full integration into the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP), securing joint lithium mining rights in South America, are seen as milestones in Indo-US cooperation. The second Trump administration has introduced a distinct paradigm shift in technology policy by blending aggressive deregulation with nationalist economic priorities. Domestically, the administration has fostered a closer alliance with Silicon Valley, advocating for a deregulatory environment designed to catalyze rapid private-sector innovation. On December 11, 2025, the United States inaugurated the "Pax Silica" initiative, a strategic multilateral framework comprising eight core nations and four guest participants. Designed to secure the global artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductor value chains, Pax Silica seeks to establish a "trusted ecosystem" that insulates high-tech manufacturing from geopolitical coercion. As of February 2026, the India-US partnership has successfully navigated complex geopolitical waters. A major trade understanding was reached where the US reduced effective tariffs on Indian goods to 18%, in exchange for India's strategic "pivot" in energy procurement.

MULTI-ALIGNMENT: THE "BALANCING ACT" IN PRACTICE

India's multi-alignment strategy is best observed through its ability to manage "adversarial partnerships." Unlike traditional allies who must adopt a unified stance, India navigates global crises by decoupling its interests across different geographies.

I. The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: The Ultimate Stress Test

The Russia-Ukraine war is the most prominent example of India's refusal to pick a side while maintaining energy ties with Russia. India has simultaneously increased humanitarian aid and technical assistance to Ukraine, positioning itself as a leader of the "Global Majority" that wants stability. During the December 2025 Modi-Putin Summit, PM Modi reiterated that the conflict must end through diplomacy, not the battlefield.

II. Middle East Pragmatism: The I2U2 and Iran

India's engagement in the Middle East showcases a "mini-lateral" approach where it partners with the US without inheriting the US's enemies.

I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, USA): Often called the "West Asian Quad," this group focuses on joint investments in water, energy, transportation, food, and technology without getting dragged into Middle Eastern conflicts. Here, India aligns with US interests to counter regional instability and promote economic integration. Historically, India had to balance its ties with Israel against its relationships with Arab nations. I2U2, born from the spirit of the Abraham Accords, allows India to sit at the same table with both Israel and the UAE, treating them as part of a single economic corridor. India views the Middle East as its "extended neighborhood." By engaging both the I2U2 and Iran, India ensures it is not boxed into a "Sunni vs. Shia" or "US vs. Iran" binary, prioritizing its own maritime access and energy routes. For India, I2U2 is about "Strategic De-risking." It ensures that even if one part of the world (like Eastern Europe) is in turmoil, India's food and energy supply chains remain anchored in a "trusted" four-way partnership. This again shows how India's Multi-alignment balances Indian interests with global politics.

III. Institutional Hedging: BRICS vs. The Quad

The most striking visual of multi-alignment is India's presence in diametrically opposed international forums and practice in accordance with its own national interests. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a strategic diplomatic partnership between four major democracies: India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The group's primary vision is to ensure a "Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific." While it is often discussed as a counterweight to China's growing regional influence, the Quad officially defines itself as a "force for global good," focusing on non-military issues. India ensures the Quad does not become a formal military alliance (like NATO). By maintaining its "Multi-alignment," India keeps the group focused on development and technology rather than just containment, which makes the Quad more acceptable to other Asian nations (like ASEAN). Through the TRUST initiative and iCET, the Quad helps India build resilient semiconductor supply chains and co-develop critical defense tech (like jet engines and drones). It provides India with the high-tech assistance it needs to balance its security challenges.

Almost simultaneously, India sits at the table with China and Russia in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). India has formally assumed the BRICS Chairmanship for 2026 on January 1, taking over from Brazil, with a mission to steer the expanded 11-member bloc toward an inclusive green agenda and a "humanity-first" approach amid shifting global geopolitics. India uses the Quad to address its security concerns in the maritime domain, while it uses BRICS to highlight the voice of the Global South and push for a multi-polar financial system. India's independent strategy is anchored by the acronym Prime Minister Modi recently redefined for the 2026 presidency: Building Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability (B.R.I.C.S.). By being in both, India prevents any single bloc from making decisions that could be detrimental to Indian interests. While "de-dollarization" is a major theme in BRICS, India's approach is distinct. India has resisted the idea of a single "BRICS Currency," viewing it as premature and potentially dominated by the Chinese Yuan. Instead, India promotes the Internationalization of the Rupee. By February 2026, India had operationalized "Special Rupee Vostro Accounts" with over 22 countries to settle trade directly, reducing "dollar shocks" without declaring war on the greenback.

CHALLENGES AND FRICTION POINTS

I. Trade and Tariff Wars

"America First" vs. "Atmanirbhar Bharat": The bilateral economic relationship between the United States and India is increasingly defined by the friction between two divergent paradigms: the populist-driven 'America First' doctrine and India's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative for self-reliance. This ideological intersection has precipitated a period of heightened trade protectionism, characterized by the U.S. designating India as a 'tariff king' — a narrative India counter-argues as a necessary defense of its developmental economic trajectory. Central to this discord is India's pursuit of technological sovereignty, which necessitates a precarious reliance on American intellectual property while simultaneously seeking to decouple from foreign manufacturing dependencies. Tensions peaked in late 2025 when the US imposed punitive 25% duties on Indian goods, citing India's continued purchase of Russian oil. By early 2026, a "de-escalation deal" was reached, reducing US reciprocal tariffs to 18%.

II. Strategic Divergence:

The Pakistan Pivot: Indian policymakers remain wary of the US's periodic "re-engagement" with Pakistan's military establishment. Recent US efforts to mediate an India-Pakistan ceasefire or provide counter-terrorism aid to Islamabad are often viewed in New Delhi as a return to a "hyphenated" South Asia policy that undermines India's regional leadership. In a four-day armed conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025, the U.S. administration claimed a direct role in brokering the ceasefire. India officially denied third-party involvement, asserting that the resolution was strictly bilateral. A major point of contention in 2026 is the U.S. decision to provide a \$700 million sustainment package for Pakistan's F-16 fleet. While the U.S. insists its ties with both nations are independent, India maintains that any enhancement of Pakistan's conventional military capability directly degrades the South Asian security balance, forcing India to increase its own defense spending.

The China Factor

India's multi-alignment strategy with China is fundamentally different from its engagement with the USA. While the US is a strategic partner, China is viewed as a structural rival with whom India must maintain a functional, stable relationship to avoid a two-front conflict and ensure economic growth.

The Security-First Doctrine: Since the 2020 Galwan clash, India has maintained that "the state of the border determines the state of the relationship." After years of military standoff, India and China reached a significant patrolling agreement in late 2024, followed by a formal "Strategic Dialogue" in February 2026. This reset focused on stabilizing the LAC to prevent accidental escalations. For India, borders are a litmus test for trust and trade and screen every investment for national security concerns. In the February 11, 2026 Strategic Dialogue, India restated that while "positive momentum" exists due to the October 2024 pact, "concerns on sensitive issues" (the LAC and Tibet) remain the primary barrier to a full "reset" of ties. India notably supported China's role in the 2026 BRICS summit but refused to return to pre-2020 air connectivity agreements until further border verifications are complete.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of the U.S.-India relations as of early 2026 confirms that India has moved beyond the reactive posture of a "balancing power" to the proactive status of a "leading power." While the Cold War era was defined by a "crisis of trust" (Chaudhuri, 2014) and a defensive obsession with non-alignment, the modern Indian state utilizes its doctrine of Multi-Alignment as a tool for global influence. This shift is most visible in India's calculated "strategic silence" regarding U.S. unilateralism in South America and the Middle East — a restraint that serves not as a sign of weakness, but as a deliberate trade-off to secure its position in the high-stakes technological order. To counter U.S. "tariff diplomacy," India must expand its trade basket so no single partner has disproportionate leverage. India should prioritize similar deals with the UK and the Mercosur bloc. This "multi-directional trade" provides an insurance policy against bilateral U.S. shocks.

By prioritizing the TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology) framework and the 2026 "Pax Silica" invitation over traditional ideological rhetoric, New Delhi has demonstrated a willingness to compartmentalize friction points. This pragmatism allows India to leverage its deepening partnership with Washington to build the material foundations of power — indigenous

semiconductor fabs, AI infrastructure, and resilient mineral supply chains — without surrendering its Strategic Autonomy. In this new era, India's value to the international system lies in its ability to act as a "bridge" in a fragmented world: it remains a vital pillar of the U.S.-led tech ecosystem while simultaneously championing the interests of the Global South and maintaining legacy ties within BRICS. Ultimately, India's engagement with the United States in 2026 suggests that multi-alignment is no longer a temporary balancing act, but a permanent strategy for a rising power. By navigating the "Wild West" of transactional geopolitics with a mix of quiet diplomacy and high-tech integration, India is successfully charting a course toward a multipolar world where it is not merely a swing state, but a "consequential pole" in its own right (Chatham House, 2026). The durability of this model will depend on India's ability to maintain domestic economic resilience and manage the escalating trade tensions with Washington, ensuring that its "strategic bet" on the U.S. partnership continues to yield the dividends of sovereignty and national growth.

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