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Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 17, N.º 2
November 2026–April 2027

JANUS.NET
e-journal of International Relations

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE EMERGING MULTIPOLAR ORDER: BALANCING THE QUAD, BRICS AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Introduction

The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar international order has opened up certain substantial strategic new opportunities for the rising powers. India, with its fast emerging economy and military capacities and ever-changing diplomacy, is steadily becoming a leading figure in world politics. The country attempts to strengthen its position within the current international structure; at the same time it strives to influence proactively the architecture of the regional security arrangements to its advantage.

Since its independence, India has helped to position itself as an advocate of strategic autonomy, a principle deeply embedded in the ideology of the Non-Alignment Movement in the Cold War era. In response to the changing geopolitical dynamics, India has adapted itself with the demands of multipolarity by dealing with different centres of power. Contemporary Indian foreign policy encompasses now participation in various multilateral institutions, such as the Quad, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and G20.

The current research study makes use of the qualitative research design that is based on interpretive policy analysis and the theory of realist international relations. It uses documentary research of primary and secondary sources between 2020-2025 to study India's strategic autonomy.

The central research question that is followed for this inquiry is How does India balance its aspirations for strategic autonomy and engages with competing geo-political blocs?

Theoretical Framework Strategic Autonomy and Middle Power Diplomacy

Strategic autonomy is conceptualised in terms of the degree to which a state is free to formulate and implement its foreign policy without outside obligations or pressures to

coerce it into policy choices. This concept has a strong place in the field of international relations, especially in the context of middle power states.

From a realist perspective, in order to maximize their national security and diplomatic leverage, states crave strategic autonomy. Conversely, a liberal institutionalist view holds that joining intergovernmental political groups such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation could add a member state's influence to its power base while maintaining its strategic independence.

India's diplomatic attitude in modern context is portrayed with a hybrid aspect. Rather than identifying with any one strategic bloc, Indian foreign policy is increasingly taking on a multipolar slant, moving in a direction of a tailor-made coalition for particular issues, and going for ambitious bilateral partnerships with a wide range of actors.

India and the Quad: Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

India's foreign policy has various dimensions, and one of the emerging ones is the Quad, a dialogue with the United States, Japan and Australia. Quad group members have all joined together to discuss issues of maritime protection, freedom of navigation and containing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

India's participation in the Quad is driven partly by Chinese military expansion and Ladakh border stand-off. Nonetheless, India has wisely refrained from calling the Quad in a formal military alliance. Instead, it has defined cooperation as an economic and security partnership based on maritime connectivity, energy security, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, counter-terrorism and sustainable development.

This strategic orientation, which has been called 'defensive diplomacy', allows India to cooperate on security issues without annoying its main rivals.

Engagement with BRICs and the Global South

While India is intensifying cooperation with countries in the West, it maintains close engagement with institutions that are attuned to emerging market economies. In particular, the BRICS group provides a platform for India to effect changes to the International Monetary Fund's reform and bilateral cooperation among the states in the group.

Through BRICS, India is supportive of other initiatives, like the New Development Bank, which aims to make available alternative sources of infrastructure funding for developing countries.

India also emphasises on leadership within the Global South underlining priorities like climate justice, development finance and technology transfer. The idea of India as a conduit between the developed and developing worlds is still relevant to G20 considerations.

Strategic Relations with Russia and Europe

India's foreign policy has traditionally had a strong affinity for Russia. While simultaneously improving the relation with Western powers, India has continued to have substantive relationship with Russia with focus on defence and hydrocarbon sectors.

A recent aspect that has characterised India's strategic journey is the growth of economic and technological linkages with the European Union. This expanded association represents India's determination not to limit itself to a narrow structure of bilateral relations and avoid getting stuck in the tight corset of a bilateral alliance.

Challenges to Strategic Autonomy

Attempts to support India's aspiration towards great power status with more vigorous diplomacy, alongside its increase in participation in the multilateral institutions that form the contemporary global order do not however automatically transition to an elevation of strategic autonomy for the country. The geopolitics of the region in which India is located-the constant volatility being induced by Pakistan, China's growing influence, unstable political dynamics of the neighbouring states, the volatilities in the energy market, and the long-term economic challenges-are still eroding the capacity of India to exercise an absolutely autonomous course of action. Moreover, India's efforts to interact with a wide range of major powers, at the same time aiming at having an independent role in the world order, are other constraints that limit New Delhi's ability to act with maximum autonomy in response to the evolving regional and global environment.

Regional Security Pressure

One of the main challenges that India faces in its quest for strategic autonomy is its extremely complex regional security environment. Located in South Asia, India's geographical location brings it close to a number of contemporary zones of instability, conflict and armed confrontation as well as long - standing territorial disputes and a multiplicity of border issues with its neighbours. Rising Tensions in the Indian subcontinent has been going on for a long period of time. In addition to the emerging competition between major world powers in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian subcontinent itself is slowly getting overloaded with more and more militarisation, which tends to increase the security predicament for India in the region. The most serious security issue facing the country emanates from the rivalry between India and China, especially the ongoing border disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China that was aggravated by the skirmishes in the Galwan Valley on 15 June 2020. This event has created mistrust and war-like conditions between the two states. China has continually developed capacities to strengthen its claims along the LAC and modernise the infrastructure based near its borders. Its naval expansion within the Indian Ocean has also materially changed the security dynamics of India's neighbourhood, which has led India to counterbalance this development by enhancing defence cooperation with like-minded states, especially through the quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad). However, this strategy has played a significant role in curtailing the neutrality of India on the security front. China is not the only cause of tension for India; the fact that it has

a longstanding dispute with neighbour Pakistan including the Kashmir dispute and periodic skirmishes at the border continue to pose big challenges. In February 2019, a terrorist attack on Indian security forces in Pulwama in Indian controlled Kashmir, in which at least 40 Indian personnel were killed brought the two countries near to all-out war. In reprisal for Indian aerial strikes against alleged terrorist camps within Pakistan, Pakistan's air force intercepted Indian aerial systems, an Indian fighter jet was shot down, after which the pilot landed safely within Pakistani territory. Owing to these security threats, India has expended a large share of its budget on defence aiming to protect its borders against the ever-present militant pressures and 'rival nuclear power' countries which distracts it from its role as a global power. Decades of efforts to promote a stable relationship with Pakistan seem to have reached an impasse, while the regional instability within Afghanistan and the larger Indian Ocean is adding complications that will likely be relevant in India's response to the upheaval triggered by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. Ongoing instability in the region that extends into the Indian Ocean continues to require India's response while seeking to maintain a free foreign policy approach in South Asia.

Economic Constraints

The impetus behind the vigorous engagement of India with the current world order is not only due to the fact that it is the world's fastest growing major economy - though it is some five percent ahead of Brazil and has a rapidly growing middle class - but also because it has become clear that, despite the great strides being made along the path to socio-economic development, poverty and the lack of resources still exist at a considerable level, precluding any really decisive impact on the world stage. India is indeed a rapidly rising economic power in a historically changing world system; however, its socio- economic growth hardly hides its overall reliance on outside actors though its diplomatically and geopolitical efforts are often limited to just attempts at mediocre intervention. An independent role in international politics depends not only on political acumen but for most states it is inseparable from economic performance, technological advancement, and volume of development assistance. India has become a major economic power, developed its diplomatic reach and has an active engagement in multilateral fora and modernises its defence capabilities. Nevertheless, its economy is still plagued by a variety of structural challenges, such as increasing disparities in income, high levels of unemployment, lack of infrastructure development and severe developmental gaps in the various parts of the country. These critical development issues require a high level of state investment to bring material progress. Given current constraints on resources any kind of significant external intervention is only possible at the expense of great sacrifice domestically. One of the major challenges faced by India is in the area of technological and industrial strength. While India has made remarkable strides to establish itself as an information-technology hub and has a fairly well-established space programme, India is still reliant on advanced defence technology, energy resources, and highly technological products and materials from countries such as Russia and other global suppliers. The spectrum of goods and resources ranging from crude oil, natural gas, high-technology defense systems, and high-tech industrial machinery shows the extreme limitations in domestic production capacity within India and as a result of this the country remains highly dependent on imports from foreign

markets. This dependence compromises the ability of India to take strategic decisions with conviction and firmness during times of increasing political volatility and other disruptions that pervade the global system. An additional constraint is that India has an ambition to be a significant actor in multilateral institutions and make a meaningful contribution to global governance.

India will need a tremendous amount of financial resources to support different aid initiatives, climate change mitigation investments, and other aspects of global governance, such as development aid and infrastructure projects throughout the developing world. Although, undeniably, India is an economic power in the modern era, its economic capabilities are far behind China and further afield from the economic resources once held by global power leaders like the United Kingdom in the interwar, post-war and imperial era. Consequently, India is not yet in a position to invest enormous amounts of capital in the efforts to foster a powerful global leadership role. Meeting its goals in global governance and other multilateral and plurilateral settings will require a competitive distribution of resources in Indian policymaking, which will further limit the ability of Indian leaders to operate as autonomous actors or to enjoy what some scholars call "strategic autonomy."

With the upsurge of great power competition, the international political activities are characterized by the strong competition between the United States and China. Rising tensions between these preeminent powers create higher levels of competition for global leadership and influence international relations through changing political alliances, commercial ties and new forms of governance. India has to tread a fine path while dealing with this ongoing competition.

India has been looking to cement its strategic partnership with the United States in the areas of defense cooperation, technological cooperation, and a shared agenda on security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. In recent years, the bilateral defense relationship has been deepened through memorandum of understanding, defense agreements, joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and cooperative participation in multilateral forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation framework.

India's strategy for multilateralism, regional security in trade and competitiveness has to be calibrated that balances its competition with China without undermining policy autonomy. The country is still wary of entering binding alliances and its economic and diplomatic relations with China still have many faces and an inherent complexity. India also has centuries old civilizational ties with Russia which continue to provide it defence requirements as well as energy security.

India's task is to handle these diverse relationships without being coerced into a restrictive geopolitical box. The fact that the world arena is divided into well-defined competing camps leads to the doubling of the pressure on individual states to join certain blocs. India's challenge, therefore, is to maneuver through this complex web of relationships without triggering any adverse reaction from major global actors through its policies.

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a transformation in its geopolitical composition, which makes the competition among major powers more competitive and intense. The struggle for influence is being played out in areas such as infrastructure development,

technological standards, supply chain logistics, and maritime security. India has to calibrate its geopolitical response to the changing Indo-Pacific space in a manner that is to its strategic interests but keeping in mind the principles of its strategic autonomy.

India's strategy is part of a wider shift in international relations, in which new power holders pursue business and diplomatic strategies that are very different from those of the past. Instead of being tied to mutually exclusive blocs and alliances, emerging nations increasingly look for a variety of partnerships in a spectrum of multilateral organizations.

Thus, India's commitment to strategic autonomy is its alternative diplomatic model in a multipolar world. By keeping the relations among competing blocs under control, India seeks to maximize its influence while preserving its policy independence.

India's foreign policy is marked by pragmatism and flexibility in reacting to the changing global dynamics. Membership in strategic groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, BRICS and the G20 give India an opportunity to bridge engagement with capitals in a Western world and Global South partners.

The pursuit of multilateralism and pursuit of a strategic alignment strengthens India's ability to play a substantive role in global affairs and hence increases India's external strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, the challenges presented by the distribution of power across the world continue to hamper India's attempts at stabilizing the regional security environment, and even the success of India's multilateral alignment strategy is not definitive.

In the recent development, the international system is gradually inclining towards the direction of multipolarity. Major developing countries, especially those emerging from the Asia-Pacific region, are considering innovative mechanisms to cope with this growing multipolarity in the current global affairs. Indian foreign policy may provide a relevant point of reference for the study of these dynamics, for both academics and practitioners.

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How to cite this note

Singh, Aditya Pratap & Lal, Ashish Kumar (2026). India's Strategic Autonomy in the Emerging Multipolar Order: Balancing the Quad, Brics and the Global South. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 17, N.º 2, November 2026-April 2027, pp. 760-766. https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.17.2.04

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