

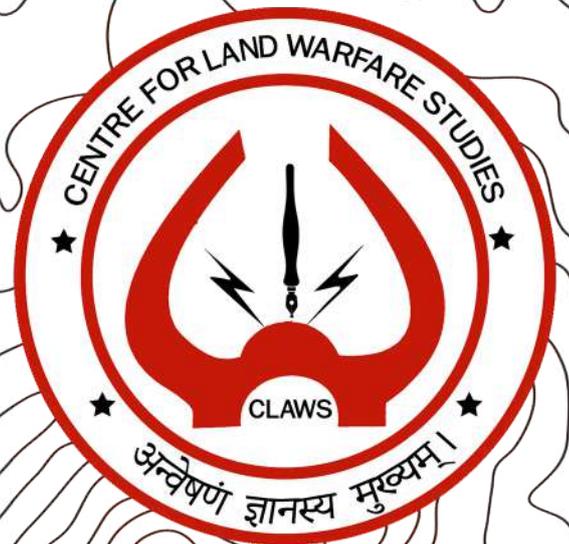
# Issue Brief

March 2026

No: 497

**India @78 (1947 – 2025):  
A Journey of India's Foreign  
Policy from Non-Alignment  
to Strategic Autonomy**

Major General Mukesh Bhanwala  
and Dr Anurag Jaiswal



**A Journey of India's Foreign Policy from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy**

**Abstract**

India's foreign policy is deeply rooted in its rich civilisation, culture and history. Throughout, India has followed the principles of non-alignment and the values of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, meaning the 'world is one family'. Over the past 78 years since independence, India has evolved from 'non-alignment' to 'strategic autonomy' to 'multi-alignment', keeping its national interest always prime. Thus, in the contemporary multi-polar world, India's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' also reflects its evolving foreign policy. Today, India looks at a new international order with better representation of the Global South<sup>1</sup>, more inclusivity and mutual respect among nations. This paper analyses India's march through non-alignment and multi-alignment, focusing on how India maintains its 'strategic autonomy' for a better, sustainable world order.

**Keywords:** Non-alignment, Strategic Autonomy, Atmanirbhar, Global South, Quasi-alliance, Cold War

**Introduction: Reflections from the Past**

***Genesis of Non-Alignment***

As India gained independence in 1947, the global order was in disarray— with the end of World War II, the global order started witnessing the collapse of the colonial system. Simultaneously, an independence struggle had also commenced in many other parts of the world viz. Africa, Asia and Latin America. Within no time, in the early 1950s, the Cold War between the two superpowers — United States of America (USA) and the USSR, was at its peak. It was at this critical juncture that the concept of non-alignment originated, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was founded in April 1955 at the Bandung Asian-African Conference (Rossow, R.M. 2005), attended by 29 Heads of State belonging to the first post-colonial generation of leaders from the two continents. The aim of NAM initially was to identify and assess the prevalent world issues and to pursue joint policies in international relations. The actions of this movement led to the decolonisation process, further leading to the creation of new sovereign states. From the very beginning, India was at the forefront of the NAM. India, along with other non-aligned countries, focused on aspects of self-determination, national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, non-adherence to multilateral military pacts and the independence of non-aligned countries from great powers or bloc influences and rivalries, struggle against imperialism/ colonialism, non-interference into the internal affairs of other states, peaceful coexistence, socio-economic development and international cooperation.

***India's Choice of Non-alignment***

The Indian Prime Minister, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, very consciously advocated the non-aligned movement, and as a result, India adopted non-alignment as its foreign policy, which gradually evolved through continuous interaction with domestic circumstances and the external environment. Non-alignment was a

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*1. Patrick, "The Term 'Global South' Is Surging. It Should Be Retired." The "Global South" refers to a diverse group developing & emerging countries located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These regions share a common history of colonialism, economic dependency, and socio-political struggles. Unlike their more economically advanced Northern counterparts, these countries often face substantial developmental challenges.*

strategy for India to survive and establish itself in a world moving rapidly towards bipolar world order. Though it was a difficult task, given the political dynamics of that time, India preferred to choose non-alignment owing to several factors. **Firstly**, India had won freedom after a long independence struggle and wanted to protect this hard-won freedom and sovereignty and march onto the path of socio-economic development of its people. **Secondly**, geographic proximity to the USSR and China, the two socialist states, led India away from the USA. The then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, admired the socialist system followed by USSR on one side, and on other side, India also officially recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC)—a Communist nation. **Thirdly**, the main focus of India after independence was on socio-economic development, which India could pursue better as a non-aligned country. **Fourthly**, after a long independence struggle, India wanted to be peaceful and promote peace. For this, India even extended a hand of friendship to China via the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954, while maintaining its non-aligned stance.

By following the non-aligned movement, India occupied a pre-eminent place in the comity of non-aligned nations, which had remained away from the ensuing Cold War. India's foreign policy since Independence can be analysed in two distinct phases (Pandey, S. 2025). **Firstly**, during the Cold War i.e. from 1950 till 1991; and **secondly**, from 1991 through the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, till now.

### ***Cold War Era***

It is pertinent to highlight that NAM was conceived when bipolarity was at its peak in global politics, with the world divided into two ideologies viz. Democracy and Communism, with the USA and USSR leading one each. The Cold War era saw two phases of India's non-alignment policy. The first phase from independence till the 1971 India-Pakistan war, gave prominence to the political aspects. This phase saw four wars—three with Pakistan (in 1947–48, 1965, 1971) and one with China in 1962. With a resounding victory by a lightning campaign in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, also giving birth to Bangladesh, political factors took a backseat, bringing the economic factors to the forefront. Pakistan, during the Cold War, was inching closer to the USA and Britain, because of which India's non-alignment policy had to undergo several foreign policy challenges and tests. To counter this, the USSR was in search of new friends, and accordingly, it reached out to anti-imperialist, non-capitalist and autonomous states through its new concept of "National Democracy", and states like India, Indonesia, Egypt, etc. found favour on this front.

Very soon, in the 1950s, the USSR and India grew closer as the USSR assisted India in its quest for industrialisation by building heavy industries and also in the accomplishment of objectives laid out in its Five-Year Plans. Simultaneously, the Soviet veto on the Kashmir issue and India's reluctance to condemn Soviet intervention in Hungary further cemented this relationship. The 1962 India-China War was a watershed event in India's foreign policy, which was marked by non-alignment. USSR, though initially supported China, soon adopted a neutral stance and urged both countries to resolve their issues through bilateral negotiations. The USA offered some military assistance to India, which, some analysts feel, made China declare a unilateral ceasefire and retreat to the McMahon line, as it was before the war. In these challenging, turbulent and tumultuous times, despite humiliation by China and USA's efforts to tilt India towards the West, India could stand on its own and maintain non-alignment as per its ideals and principles of NAM. Later, the India-Pakistan Wars on 1965 and 1971 further put India on a pedestal of non-alignment as a strong pillar of foreign policy. Although, India signed a 20-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR, India kept away from calling it a military alliance, and even the USSR acknowledged this. India had also been able to remain away

from the USSR's "Brezhnev Doctrine of Collective Security for Asia" (Ghehardt, A.O.), that aimed to curtail China's influence. However, slowly, India-Soviet friendship kept growing as they further signed a 15-year economic accord in 1973, and the USSR also assisted in satellite launches, provided wheat to avoid food crisis, assisted Steel manufacturing public sector units (PSUs) and many more. Despite all this, some analysts say that though India got into a 'quasi-alliance'<sup>2</sup> with the USSR (now Russia), it remained non-aligned and the USSR could not acquire military facilities at Visakhapatnam for its flotilla and also failed to erode India's autonomy in external relations. Thus, India remained steadfast on its non-alignment policy.

### *Post-Cold War era*

After the end of the Cold War and into the 21st century, as the Indian economy also improved, this "non-alignment" policy matured into "self-alignment" and soon took shape as Strategic Autonomy. What is Strategic Autonomy? Strategic Autonomy can be defined as a state's capacity to make independent foreign policy choices on global issues in pursuit of its national interests (Tharoor, S. 2025). In political terms, too, after the Cold War, as the global dynamics first changed from bipolar to unipolar for a short time in the 1990s and thereafter to multi-polar, India had become strong enough economically as well as militarily to pursue its foreign policy on its own terms and transformed its 'non-alignment policy' to a more resolute 'Strategic Autonomy'. The events like 1998 nuclear tests, Indo-US Nuclear Deal (123 Agreement) in 2006-07, India's stance during Global War on Terror (GWOT) first against Al-Qaeda and later against Taliban, India's engagement with Afghanistan (Taliban), India's vaccine diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic, its neutral stand during the Russia - Ukraine war and Israel – Palestine conflict— all these have cemented India's pragmatic foreign policy's hard power as well as soft power and displayed India's resolve to its Strategic Autonomy. Some foreign policy analysts have connected the non-aligned movement of yesteryears with contemporary times Strategic Autonomy by calling it "non-alignment 2.0".

India's foreign policy today encompasses a strategic autonomy or multi-alignment strategy to maximise national power and also build strategic partnerships with the countries that have adverse relations among themselves, like Russia-USA, China-USA or the Middle East countries. This has enabled India to engage freely with all on its own terms.

### **Contemporary Times Perspectives**

#### **Challenges**

The contemporary world, in recent past, has been more volatile than ever, since the end of World War II, seeing number of uncertain events in military as well as non-military domains, like the covid-19 pandemic, territorial military conflicts like Russia-Ukraine war, Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, Israel – Palestine/ Hamas conflict, Bangladesh's fragile government, Iran-Israel-USA conflict, India-Pakistan conflict, increased belligerence of China in South and East China seas and global tariff war by president Trump has further complicated the issue.

India has been a rising regional power in the past decade with robust economic growth, standing today as the fifth largest economy in nominal GDP terms and third in PPP terms, which too has enabled India to graduate from **non-alignment 1.0** to **non-alignment 2.0 (or the Strategic Autonomy)** as foreign policy to pursue its national interests. However, uncertain events like the Covid-19 pandemic had caused a global

*2. Gropedia, "Quasi-Alliance." A quasi-alliance is an informal security partnership in international relations wherein states collaborate strategically against common external threats through implicit understandings, military coordination, or political assurances, absent the formal treaty obligations of traditional alliances.*

economic slowdown, further raising inflation and unemployment, generating supply shocks of critical raw materials that tested the resilience of supply chains. Moreover, India's abstention from taking sides in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, following the Black Swan event of the pandemic, has posed numerous challenges to India about its standing in the international forum on justification of Russia's invasion. It becomes more challenging when seen in light of USSR's (now Russia & erstwhile USSR) continued assistance to India in political, economic, and military aspects during the Cold War era, when India was at a nascent stage in world diplomacy, as highlighted earlier.

China's belligerence had also resulted in heightened tensions along the India-China border commencing with Chumar in 2014, Doklam in 2017 and Galwan (Eastern Ladakh) in 2020; however, post the SCO meet of September 2025, relations have shown some improvement. Paksitan-China collusion has further exacerbated the challenges on its northern and western borders. This was seen, to some extent, with rising tensions between India & Pakistan, resulting in a 96-hour conflict in May 2025. USA's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, followed by worsening situation in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and current strained Pakistan–Afghan relations are also a cause of worry. Unconventional events like climate change (floods of 2025 in India and Pakistan) pose another threat that can have catastrophic consequences.

India's strategic neighbourhood in South Asia remains economically poor. Moreover, with Sri Lanka already facing economic crisis and Pakistan & Bangladesh facing economic problems, this instability is likely to continue. The regional grouping viz. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has already faced challenges to its identity since its inception, and SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) has also not taken off. Overlooking SAARC, is the inherent risk of China being invited to be a full member, which shall further exacerbate India's security challenges. With the second term of President Trump, international relations are also entering a challenging, strained phase.

### **India's Foreign Policy Dilemma**

Today, India faces a big security dilemma and finds itself navigating a delicate path between competing giants: the USA, China and Russia (Tharoor, S. 2025), because of several factors like unprecedented rise of China economically as well as militarily, change of presidency in USA with focus on MAGA (Make America Great Again), USA's relative decline with reducing influence worldwide coupled with indeterminate Indo-Pacific policy, Russia-Ukraine war leading to increased Sino-Russia strategic convergence, Trump's tariff war with its impact on India and India's own economic needs to support its national interest and national aim. This further gets complex by the ongoing India-Pakistan tensions. To achieve a continued and uninterrupted growth of 7-8 percent for the next decade — to achieve a USD 10 trillion economy by 2035, India requires a peaceful decade from a security point of view and a large amount of raw materials/ resources, investment (FDI), high-end technology, etc. from an economic point of view. The Russia-Ukraine war established a new security paradigm, wherein Russia-China engage more vigorously, trying to achieve strategic convergence to counter respective threats from NATO in Europe by Russia and in the Indo-Pacific by China.

The USA, too, is now focusing more on Indo-Pacific to counter China. Several multilateral frameworks like the Quad (USA, Japan, India, Australia), I2U2 (India, Israel, USA, UAE), AUKUS (Australia, UK, USA) etc. point to the increased interest and priority of USA to the Indo-Pacific, but that too is now facing road blocks with Trump in second term, specially seen in the new national Security Strategy (NSS) released by the White House. India, faced with a two-front (rather 2.5 front, considering the Insurgency too) threat for the past two decades, had increased its engagement with the USA, during President Biden's tenure, on multilateral

as well as bilateral front including defence cooperation involving the purchase of weapons and equipment. To counter China, India adopted the 'Look East Policy' in the 1990s, graduating to the 'Act East Policy' in 2014 with ASEAN, which helped to some extent (Rajeev, N. 2025).

### **Indo-Russian Relations and Strategic Autonomy**

With a historic legacy, Indo-Russian relations, in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to date have been of mutual trust and partnership (Torri, M., Boni, F. et.al. 2024). India's 70 percent defence equipment is of Russian origin, with new equipment like the S-400 missile system, etc., coming in. Maintenance of the existing inventory itself is a huge task and requires spare parts from Russia. Both countries have been conducting bilateral and multilateral exercises for their military regularly. India has remained neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war, continues to buy Russian oil and is also engaging with Russia in several regional political, economic and security frameworks like the BRICS, SCO, RIC, etc., in addition to other multilateral frameworks. Here too, India has displayed its 'Strategic Autonomy' as it is simultaneously engaging with the USA, Israel, France and the EU in defence cooperation, development of new weapon platforms and enhancing security relations, thus diversifying India's defence basket. Of late, India has taken cognisance of Russia's increasing closeness with China and Pakistan with respect to security and defence matters. Russia, too, is concerned by India's increasing engagement with the USA,—'Quad' being a friction point.

### **Indo-US Relations and Strategic Autonomy**

India-US relations shared a chequered history during the Cold War—the final nail being the imposition of sanctions on India post-1998 nuclear tests. However, changing global dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Global War on Terrorism - GWOT, China-Pak Collusivity, etc.) led to the convergence of India-US interests. India's economic rise in the past decade also led to recognition of India's growing stature and importance in the developing world. However, one of the biggest factors in India-US relations is the strategic and economic rise of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which was threatening USA's hegemony the world over, and USA found India to be the most suitable counterbalance to China. President Trump even announced, during February 2020 visit to India, that India-US bilateral relationship is elevated to a Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and from then on, started the convergence of the two largest democracies. In the past two decades, India and the USA have signed several defence cooperation agreements latest being the 'Security of Supply Arrangements' (SOSA) and a new 10-year defence framework, other foundational agreements, the enhanced scope of bilateral training exercises (Yudh Abhyas, Malabar, etc.), the 2+2 ministerial dialogue and enhanced defence equipment trade. Despite all this, India again displayed its strategic autonomy, firstly in getting relaxation against the USA law of CAATSA (Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act) in buying S-400 missiles from Russia and secondly, by adopting a neutral stance in the Russia-Ukraine war. Although President Trump's claim of intervention in Op Sindoor, coupled with tariff issues, has temporarily affected India-US relations, however, these are likely to resolve soon.

### **Recommendations**

Today, the world is witnessing rapid geopolitical, economic and military shifts, all of which are backed by fast-evolving technological advancements. India itself is engaged in a warlike situation with Pakistan, in addition to other ongoing global conflicts. All this has caused a dilemma and uncertainty in India's foreign policy. However, at the same time, it has opened new opportunities for India to seize and capitalise on, thereby pursuing its national interest of socio-economic development with adequate strategic

autonomy in foreign policy. A cornerstone of India's strategic autonomy is self-reliance, embodied in the "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" (Boya, S.K.) initiative, and India has already set sail on a sound footing, with a focus on "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat", which needs to be pursued in earnest over this decade for tangible results. Therefore, today for India, Strategic Autonomy is not a nostalgic return to Cold War non-alignment, but a far more assertive idea to include freedom to choose partners issue by issue.

As part of Atmanirbharta, we need to ensure a low-cost and good-quality economy, which would increase our exports and thus chart India's path to a higher growth trajectory. A good and humble beginning has been made as the exports reached USD 820 billion in the financial year 2024-25. India must work upon integrating with the regional as well as global economy and give pre-eminence to 'Neighbourhood-First Policy' to become a preferred partner in its neighbourhood as well as the Indian Ocean region in their pursuit of socio-economic development as well as security needs, both military and HADR. India needs to play an important role in South Asia, carrying all neighbours on board, implementing the 'Neighbourhood First Policy' in true spirit to achieve the mission of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) as enunciated by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. India needs to exploit regional groupings like BRICS, SCO, RIC, and ASEAN plus, etc., for increased interaction with all the members.

India needs to resolve its issues with Pakistan bilaterally; continued hostilities with Pakistan in the form of Operation Sindoor will impact India's desired growth. India performed well at Presidency of SCO in 2022-23 with theme of SECURE (Security, economy & trade, connectivity, unity, respect for sovereignty and environment) SCO and G20 in 2022-23 marked by the theme 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'; and now assuming the chair of BRICS in 2026, provides an excellent opportunity to enhance its agenda of inclusive growth and peaceful economic integration of the region as well as of the global south. India should engage China to resolve the border issue; disengagement in Eastern Ladakh in the past two years, Prime Minister Modi's visit to China for the SCO meeting in September 2025, recommencement of direct flights, etc., are a welcome step in that direction. In the words of Foreign Minister Shri Jaishankar, "the Asian century can be accomplished only by joining hands by India and China" (MEA, 2022). So, India needs to focus on common interests between the two Asian powers and simultaneously pursue the resolution of their differences, ensuring that differences do not go past the common interests.

Endorsement of the above views by China highlights India's Strategic Autonomy while engaging all players in the contemporary geopolitical world. India's foreign policy needs to capitalise on the "China plus One" strategy of various multinational companies (MNCs) due to evolving challenges in the geopolitical situation, which can catapult the Indian economy to grow into a more robust and dynamic economy. This can enable India to occupy the global centre stage in conjunction with like-minded partners and democracies like the USA, Japan, the European Union, etc. The Quad, I2U2 (India, Israel, USA, UAE), IMEC (India- Middle East Economic Corridor), etc., are good baby steps in that direction.

## **Analysis and Prognosis**

Year 2025 saw India balancing its foreign policy, by avoiding absolute alignments, investing in institutional continuity and transforming economic resilience alongwith multi-dimensional diplomacy into tools of geopolitical influence. India shaped its foreign policy by renewed commitments to Strategic Autonomy by engaging with all major powers, without any full alignment, which was evident in all major global events like 17<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit at Rio de Janeiro, maintaining an active substantive role within G20, by calibrated measured response to USA trade tariffs, executing several FTAs (New Zealand, UK, Oman, European Union

etc.) {Dimitra, S. 2026}. Today, India's foreign policy objectives seem clear— to hedge with the great powers by pursuing a multi-alignment and strategic autonomy (Pandey, R. 2025).

In contemporary geo-political dynamics, is “**Strategic Autonomy**” the best choice for India, or would a “**Quasi Alliance**” with the USA or Russia yield more dividends? This is a question Indian security analysts are finding hard to work upon. As External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar writes in his book, ‘The India Way’: “This is a time for India to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support” (Jaishankar, S. 2022).

However, few facts and parameters related to India need to be considered to carry out a logical analysis, make pragmatic recommendations, and arrive at likely prognosis. **Firstly**, today India carries the voices of 1.46 billion people (approximately one-fifth of the world's population) and another 1 billion-plus people from the developing and underdeveloped world, largely known as the Global South. **Secondly**, India is today the fifth-largest economy and is likely to become the third-largest by 2030. Adding to all this, is India's rich civilisational and historical legacy and the non-expansionist nature. Thus, India has the full right to exercise its choice of foreign policy. Hence, based on the above analysis, it is felt that maintaining ‘Strategic Autonomy’ will be beneficial for India.

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## About the Author

**Major General Mukesh Bhanwala** was commissioned into ‘The Bombay Sappers’ in June 1992. An alumnus of the National Defence Academy, the General Officer commanded an Armoured Engineer Regiment in the deserts and later, an Infantry Brigade in the semi-desert sector. He commanded the elite 26 Infantry Division (The Tiger Division) during Op Sindoor as well as Op Rahat-2025, the worst floods in 40 years. He has also served as Brigadier Q (Logistics) of a Corps and Deputy GOC of an Infantry Division, both in high-altitude area. Presently, he is serving as Additional Director General, Operational Logistics in Army Headquarters.

**Dr Anurag Jaiswal**, a Professor in Department of Defence & Strategic Studies Meerut College, Meerut (U.P), has done a Master’s in year 2000 in Defence and strategic studies from the University of Allahabad, qualified UGC NET exams in June 2001 and done Ph.D degree from CCS University, Meerut, U.P. in 2007. His area of specialisation includes International relations, Area studies (Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan), National security and internal security. He is actively engaged in research work. He has authored and edited several books; also approx fifty research papers are credited to his name.



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