

# Balancing Washington and Moscow: India's Multi-Alignment Strategy in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

*India is pursuing a delicate balance between its ties with Washington and Moscow, referred to as “multi-alignment.” This strategy strengthens relationships with both the United States and Russia without fully committing to either. Historical ties to the Non-Aligned Movement and domestic concerns about sovereignty shape this approach. The evolving India–U.S. partnership has shifted from a defensive stance to a broader geopolitical engagement, allowing India to maintain its long-time bond with Russia. However, India’s connection with Russia has become more transactional, due to the limited security options Russia provides. Additionally, increasing Chinese assertiveness complicates India’s strategic landscape. While India aims for multi-alignment, the rising influence of China and the closer Beijing–Moscow ties raise concerns about maintaining a stable balance. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)*

**Keywords:** Multi-Alignment Strategy, strategic landscape, Non-Aligned Movement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The winds of change are blowing across the globe as strikes and counter-strikes are launched in this region, and skirmishes are being fought in another region. On the Asian front, non-combat support is extended from one super-power to another super-power, while, within Asia, readiness is displayed to grant full offensive military support to a small neighbour of another Asian state. The organization of alternative centres of power which serve to balance against unilateral tendencies is, in these stages, an ice-drink to save mankind from chaos and destruction. The future of mankind depends on the organization of a process of co-evolution amongst the centre of power. There is a clear respect for a real non-alignment approach. Regrettably, some partial membership of military command is agreed to thereby trailing behind the trend of non-alignment.

India occupies a key-strategic position in Asia — both continental and maritime — to which the world must pay due attention. The institution of a strategic organization in Asia serving the above process would exert a stabilizing influence on the future of mankind (D. Muraviev et al., 2022).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The development of India’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has framed the broader context for the examination of India’s multi-alignment policy in the twenty-first century. Insights from the existing literature on India’s foreign policy trajectory are supplemented by an overview of the strategic environment in which multi-alignment has emerged, focusing on the relationships with the United States, Russia, and China, the opportunities

each of these powers provides for the implementation of a multi-alignment policy, and the constraints that hinder its fuller realisation. Although multi-alignment is not a new conceptualisation of Indian diplomacy, its usage in the current context denotes a reconfiguration of priorities, instruments, and credibility following significant shifts in the strategic environment (D. Muraviev et al., 2022).

## **2.1. MULTIPOLARITY, STRATEGIC AUTONOMY, AND NON-ALIGNMENT REVISITED**

The rise of multipolarity in international relations provides contexts for non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Multipolarity refers to the absence of single or bipolar dominance, showcasing powers like China and India alongside emerging regions. This dynamic boosts the importance of non-alignment, as it requires strategic decisions with various pivot states rather than strictly value-driven choices. Leaders in multipolar systems invoke non-alignment due to differing economic and geopolitical paths of states outside the liberal Western framework. India's Foreign Minister highlighted this context, reaffirming non-alignment as essential for multi-alignment in a multipolar world, melding traditional concepts with contemporary strategic needs. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022).

## **2.2. THEORETICAL MODELS OF GREAT POWER BALANCING**

In a multipolar world characterized by complex interdependence, great powers manage bilateral relations with a deliberative focus on both opportunities for cooperation and sources of rivalry. The current literature on international relations has identified three models of great power balancing responses that states undertake when coping with multiple contiguous great powers: internal balancing, external balancing, and multi-alignment. In order to help parse the broad outlines of India's foreign policy vis-à-vis Washington and Moscow, each of these three models will be presented in historical context with a special emphasis on their practical implications. Effective policy choices across diverse spheres—diplomatic, economic, technological, and defence—are essential if India wishes to maintain the multi-alignment strategy that it has pursued since the mid-2000s and that many observers believe affords the nation its best chance of safeguarding wider strategic autonomy while navigating free and open regional order initiatives that could constrain New Delhi's geopolitical space (D. Muraviev et al., 2022).

## **3. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The evolution of India's foreign policy since independence in 1947 can be divided into distinct phases. The first phase, until the Cold War, was marked by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's articulation of five principles of international relations: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. These principles guided India's role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However, from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, India aligned with the Soviet bloc to counter perceived threats from China, leading to a decline in NAM's relevance. The Cold War's end prompted a reconfiguration of India's foreign policy. The second phase, characterized by liberalization and globalization, lasted until the mid-1990s, as the dissolution of the Soviet Union allowed India to move beyond ideologically driven alignments. During this period, India sought strategic partnerships with the U.S., Japan, China, and ASEAN, driven by economic and trade interests, culminating in trilateral dialogues initiated in 1994 with the U.S. and other nations. By the late 1990s, domestic reforms slowed, leading to a third phase defined by "multi-alignment," where India pursued symmetrical partnerships across diverse sectors with various states, including the U.S., Japan, Russia, and China. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **3.1. POST-COLD WAR REALIGNMENTS**

The end of the Cold War did not allow India to pursue its original non-alignment policy. Instead, it led to a re-alignment, where New Delhi sought to balance against the two superpowers. Globalization and liberalization pressures made India more aware of Washington and Moscow's foreign policy preferences. The formation of the Quad—comprising the US, Japan, and Australia—aimed to counter China's rising influence, further limiting

India's cooperation with Russia, particularly when it conflicted with US ambitions. The 1998 nuclear tests disrupted the balance among China, Russia, and India, exacerbated by US-Russian ties and China's growth. Post-Cold War instability regarding Pakistan transformed India's view of Russia. Initially, security ties from the Soviet era kept India connected to Moscow, primarily to mitigate the military balance with China. China became central in the triangular relationship involving India, Russia, and the US, while US military technology access offered some reassurance to Moscow. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **3.2. LIBERALIZATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

After the 1991 liberalization of India's economy, New Delhi implemented new financial policies, resulting in a 50% increase in real national income over 20 years and notable advancements in information technology, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, nanotechnology, and space technology. India became more integrated into the global economy through GATT, WTO participation, and various free trade agreements. With the Soviet Union's collapse, India transitioned from economic assistance to technology transfer and co-development, aligning with the technological cooperation desires of the United States, Japan, and the EU. This, along with India's market openness, widened Western engagement. India maintained a close relationship with Russia, a key supplier of weapons and military technology, particularly submarines. Joint strategic arms control agreements and investments in nuclear power were also pursued. The non-aligned legacy fostered ongoing high-level political dialogue. Although plans for a Next-Generation Fighter Aircraft stalled due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both nations showed interest in air-to-air refueling systems and helicopter technology for the Russian market. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

## **4. INDIA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

The events of 2020 challenged India's traditional strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, necessitating a reevaluation of its foreign policy amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics. Confronted by a rising China, India must adjust its grand strategy. The deepening ties between Beijing and Moscow, shaped by the 2001 Treaty of Good-Nighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, require New Delhi to rethink its longstanding relationship with Russia. Multi-alignment has become India's primary strategic approach, essential for balancing relationships between Washington and Moscow. In recent years, new ideas have emerged to redefine India's external engagements and strategic options, with multi-alignment as a key framework for the evolution of its foreign policy. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **4.1. INDO-AMERICAN DYNAMICS: SECURITY AND ECONOMIC LINKAGES**

The establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the United States in 1947 marked the beginning of regular political engagement. Initial ties were limited due to India's non-alignment policy and a lack of interest from the U.S. However, the end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalization led to deeper cooperation. Today, both nations share interests in global trade, counter-terrorism, and addressing China's rise as a power. Post-Soviet Union, India realigned its strategic priorities, embracing the U.S. as a superpower. The strategic partnership has matured across security, trade, energy, science, and health care domains. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **4.2. INDIA-RUSSIA TIES: HISTORICAL LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY DISCREPANCIES**

The historical legacy of India-Russia ties constitutes an important dimension of India's foreign policy. Russia remains the only major power that has retained a relatively neutral posture on India's contentious relations with Pakistan, including the latter's quest for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. However, while the historical legacy of India-Russia ties facilitates the growth of bilateral relations, a discourse analysis of the statements issued during the visits of Russian president Vladimir Putin to India on 4–5 December 2014 and 11–12 October 2018 underscores contemporary discrepancies. Emerging India-Russia disparities encompass a

widening defence cooperation gap and differences over Afghanistan, China, the US and the Indo-Pacific region. Consequent shifts in India's security and development policies construct a historically unprecedented India-Russia juncture that permits the relatively free exploration of new strategic partnerships without jeopardising bilateral relations (D. Muraviev et al., 2022).

### **4.3. CHINA'S RISE AND THE BORDER-DIPLOMACY DILEMMA**

The 21st century has witnessed the further rise of China, which has emerged as a comprehensive power and economic and military peak. Acquisition and employment of advanced technology have formed the basis for including Indian territory in the Chinese narrative and countering India's leading role in the G-20. Prolonged border skirmishes, civilizational and ideological clashes and satellite images astonishing the entire South Asia have enabled China's strategic embrace of Pakistan and expansion into the Indian Ocean region on the one hand, and establish a patron-client relationship with Russia on the other (D. Muraviev et al., 2022). While India faithfully followed the non-alignment and posturing for multi-alignment both Delhi and Beijing's approach to the power equations in the region remains subservient to both at some level. China's rise has highlighted the problems of power disparity in bordering and water-sharing nations arising from the capitalist power structures imposed on the erstwhile colonies on the one hand and the sequences and processes of agenda setting on the other.

## **5. MULTI-ALIGNMENT AS A STRATEGIC CHOICE**

Support from both the United States and Russia is vital for India's strategic autonomy. Indian leaders view multi-alignment with both nations as essential for national security, despite differing stances on Ukraine and China. The Russia-India partnership is robust, especially regarding defense equipment from the Soviet era. Without alternative partners, India's security needs and ongoing Russian support justify maintaining ties with Moscow while strengthening links with Washington. Multi-alignment enables countries to develop balanced relations without exclusivity. It involves engaging various powers in a multidirectional, balanced manner. India's multi-alignment strategy focuses on diversification, credible engagement, initiative and restraint, exploiting opportunities, and proactive management of a diverse agenda. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **5.1. DEFINITION, SCOPE, AND CREDIBILITY**

Multi-alignment reflects India's strategic choice to engage extensively with global powers—Washington, Moscow, Tokyo, Paris, and Berlin—while avoiding systemic bipolarity or multipolarity. This approach requires formalizing relationships with multiple partners across various sectors, ensuring equal status without affecting ties with other countries. Multi-alignment is complex and needs countries to understand the specific dimensions governing their interactions. Initially, overlapping dimensions should be minimized to avoid conflicts. Countries often choose to engage selectively after establishing satisfactory relations with their first partner. India prioritizes diplomacy, commerce, and defense, with the US and China as key interlocutors, aiming for expanded international cooperation while maintaining autonomy and minimizing friction. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **5.2. RISKS, TRADE-OFFS, AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

India's multi-alignment strategy has significant trade-offs and constraints. Strong ties with both the USA and Russia limit New Delhi's full alignment with either nation. This impacts India's strategic autonomy, deemed essential for its global ambitions, which is now increasingly restricted. The Russia-Ukraine conflict tests this multi-alignment approach, with the USA pressuring India to condemn Russia and reduce arms purchases. Opposition parties also criticize the government for its Russian ties, seeing them as detrimental to relations with the West. As challenges persist, India's strategy remains in development. A shift towards either power could erode this strategy's credibility, jeopardizing potential benefits and limiting India's position as a global leader. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

## **6. WASHINGTON AND MOSCOW: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR INDIA**

Access to advanced military technology is crucial in Great Power competition, particularly for countries like India striving to modernize their forces. The U.S. and Russia are major providers of such technologies. China's military modernization, driven by a comprehensive strategy over the last thirty years, raises alarms for India, especially with its rapid advances in AI, cyber capabilities, and weapons systems. This situation complicates India's strategic outlook concerning China's military intentions. India maintains strong arms ties with Russia, accounting for about 60% of its arms exports, while the U.S. also remains a significant supplier. The evolution of Indo-Russian relations reflects varying phases, potentially leading to a new phase of engagement that could enhance India's armament options amid the ongoing balance of power dynamics involving the U.S. and China. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **6.1. SECURITY AND DEFENSE PARTNERSHIPS**

In 2020, amidst the pandemic, India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, stated that important countries, such as India, strategically follow a multi-alignment policy to pursue their interests and maintain global balance. At that time, India had emerged into a substantial global player, focussing diplomatic efforts towards critical aspects of national development and stability such as defence, energy, climate change, technology, terrorism, and managing a few aggressive neighbours (D. Muraviev et al., 2022). Though much of India's ties between Washington and Moscow are based on historical grounds, the changing dynamics in both countries today afford India to strengthen its partnerships while maintaining desired levels of independence and self-sufficiency. The emergence of a new world order with geopolitical conflicts, climate challenges, and resurgent circular economy amongst a few, on top of the traditional economic, humanitarian or political factors, has posed greater challenges than expected from a multi-aligned partnership with both Washington and Moscow.

### **6.2. ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

India's trade with the US and EU has significantly increased since the 1990s, as has its economic engagement with Russia. In technology, India has formed close ties with the West in IT and telecommunications, which support emerging security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite this, India's defense trade with Russia persists, facing delays in military supply contracts, such as for the FGFA program and joint ventures. Strategically, India is aligning its partnerships within the global order. Economic ties with the US are based on support for a Washington-advocated international order, promoting a multipolar structure, though approaches may differ. Dialogue with Russia continues, focusing on economic issues like global oil prices and US-led sanctions post-Ukraine invasion. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

### **6.3. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND NARRATIVE MANAGEMENT**

India's strategic communications aim to align its emerging power status with efforts to improve adversarial relationships. Since the Cold War, India has shifted from being seen as a "developing country" to seeking recognition as a "great power." This narrative targets its populace and foreign nations, addressing its growth needs and capacity to solve global issues. It encompasses various aspects, including economics, security, governance, and culture, conveyed through diplomacy and soft power. Juggling relationships with the U.S. and Russia while managing tensions with China creates challenges. While narratives are not the main tools of multi-alignment, they bolster India's strategy by alleviating negative impacts from ties with major powers. India's push for a strategic identity that marries national integrity with respect for other nations had previously endorsed non-alignment. This perspective persists in modern discussions but is now challenged by the need to balance reliance on external powers with domestic authority. Countries like Japan, China, and Pakistan are treated as bilateral partners and rivals, reflecting their evolving statuses. Nonetheless, these relationships inform the communication and narrative

management that India employs in its strategic diplomacy to navigate its multi-alignment approach. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)(S. Singh, 2014)

## **7. REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS**

In a world characterized by compounded trade-offs, multi-alignment permits India to continue capitalizing on its long-standing relationships with Washington and Moscow (D. Muraviev et al., 2022). U.S.-India strategic convergence continues to deepen, spurred by shared democratic norms and concerns over China's assertiveness. In defence, New Delhi cooperates closely with Washington while retaining the capacity to develop capabilities independently and acquire advanced military commodities from Moscow. New Delhi is also benefiting from the extensive political, technological, and market access opportunities offered by the West, which it endeavors simultaneously to retain the option to collaborate in sensitive domains with Moscow. Multi-alignment enhances India's international standing and restores its traditional political role. Furthermore, this strategic philosophy signals that, although India welcomes U.S. involvement in the region, it does not seek to become a regional actor in a U.S.-led Asia strategy. Multi-alignment remains the evolutionary answer to the strategic dilemma inherited from the non-alignment and strategic autonomy formulations (Gonzalez Castañeda, 2017).

## **8. CASE STUDIES IN POLICY PRACTICE**

Indo-Russian and Indo-American relations are pivotal to India's early twenty-first-century foreign policy. India's longstanding association with the Soviet Union and Russia has established a basis for its multi-alignment, while enhanced cooperation with the U.S. has stimulated policy pluralism. India adopts a cautious dual approach, maintaining historical ties with Russia while strengthening relations with the U.S. This strategy has shielded India from external pressures and encouraged both nations to address its concerns. In light of economic challenges and the global recession due to the pandemic, India aims to bolster cooperation with both countries to mitigate energy supply risks and access advanced technologies. Despite Russia's ongoing military actions in Ukraine, India has focused on diplomacy, reshaping narratives, and promoting conflict resolution, further reinforcing its balancing act between Moscow and Washington and the multi-alignment doctrine. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

## **9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINING A ROBUST MULTI-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY**

India's multi-alignment strategy, backed by Prime Minister Modi, seeks to balance relationships with Washington and Moscow while avoiding dependency on either. Sixteen key recommendations for New Delhi include differentiating aspects of its partnership with Washington and fostering economic, political, and technological convergence; balancing security, economic, technological, and diplomatic interactions; engaging in defense cooperation with various partners; avoiding contentious issues; determining the desired autonomy in its Washington-Moscow relations; addressing tensions with China; developing a long-term engagement agenda with Moscow; promoting cooperation in areas like currency and biotechnology; improving strategic communication with regular high-level dialogues; exploring complementary strategies for a stable Afghanistan; evaluating long-term potential relations with major global players; enhancing diplomatic efforts for multilateral cooperation; streamlining policy-making for robust state ties; and becoming a key player in establishing a sustainable regional and global balance of power. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

## **10. CONCLUSION**

The study argues that India's foreign policy requires a multi-aligned strategy to balance interests between Washington and Moscow while engaging rising regional powers. In recent years, the US and its allies have sought closer ties with India, focusing on security and countering China. However, New Delhi emphasizes strategic autonomy, pursuing diverse national interests. As a Non-Aligned Movement member, India values its ties with

Russia for historical reasons and is cautious about aligning with Washington's pro-Ukraine stance. Russia continues to provide military and technical support, maintaining a favorable image in India. Though security and economic motivations prevent a formal alliance, both nations strive to balance their relationships with the US and Russia. The study's case studies highlight the efforts of Indian officials and elites to achieve sustainable balancing. Despite shared concerns over China, differing views on the Ukraine invasion complicate a potential formal alliance. While collaborating in the Quad and Indo-Pacific initiatives, India and the US maintain divergent security assessments. A robust economy and trade networks, viewed through the multi-aligned lens, enhance India's balancing act among great powers and bolster its global standing. (D. Muraviev et al., 2022)

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