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Strategic Autonomy in a Globalized World: India's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

*¹ Dr. Prasanta Pradhan

*¹ Assistant Professor, PG Department of Political Science, Government Women's College Sambalpur, Odisha, India.

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Abstract

In the 21st century, India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation shaped by globalization, shifting power structures, and emerging geopolitical challenges. While the principle of strategic autonomy-rooted in India's post-independence commitment to non-alignment-continues to guide its external relations, its interpretation and application have evolved considerably. This paper examines how India has adapted strategic autonomy to pursue deeper global engagement without formal alliance commitments. It analyses India's growing partnerships with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union, alongside its active participation in multilateral forums including the Quad, BRICS, G20, and the United Nations. The study also explores India's responses to regional security concerns, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, its relations with China and Pakistan, and its leadership role in the Global South. By assessing continuity and change in India's diplomatic, economic, and strategic approaches, the paper argues that India has shifted from traditional non-alignment toward a flexible strategy of multi-alignment. This approach allows India to safeguard its national interests while enhancing its influence in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international system.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Prasanta Pradhan

Assistant Professor, PG Department of Political Science, Government Women's College Sambalpur, Odisha, India.

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Introduction

India's foreign policy has traditionally been guided by the principles of sovereignty, independence, and peaceful coexistence. Since gaining independence in 1947, India sought to protect its national interests while avoiding domination by major power blocs. During the Cold War, this approach was reflected in the policy of Non-Alignment, which aimed to maintain decision-making freedom in international affairs. Over time, while global circumstances have changed, India's emphasis on independent foreign policy choices has remained a central feature of its diplomacy.

A key concept underlying this approach is strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy refers to a state's ability to make its foreign policy and security decisions independently, without being constrained by formal military alliances or external pressures. For India, it does not mean isolation from the world but rather the freedom to engage with multiple countries based on national interests. In the contemporary period, strategic autonomy has evolved from strict non-alignment into a more flexible strategy of multi-alignment,

allowing India to cooperate with different powers simultaneously. The relevance of this topic in the 21st-century global order lies in the changing nature of international relations. The world today is characterized by multipolarity, rising great-power competition, globalization, and new security challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, and regional conflicts. As a rising power, India must balance closer global engagement with the need to preserve its strategic independence. Understanding India's foreign policy approach helps explain how it navigates relations with major powers like the United States, China, and Russia while maintaining its own strategic priorities.

The Objectives of this Paper are

- To explain the evolution of India's foreign policy tradition
- To analyse the concept of strategic autonomy and its changing meaning
- To examine why strategic autonomy remains important in the 21st century

- To assess how India balances autonomy with increasing global engagement

Conceptual Framework

Strategic autonomy refers to a country's ability to make independent decisions in matters of foreign policy, security, and national interest without being constrained by external powers or formal alliances. For India, strategic autonomy does not imply isolation or neutrality; rather, it emphasizes freedom of choice in international relations. It allows India to cooperate with different countries on specific issues while retaining control over its strategic priorities and long-term goals.

Evolution from Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

During the Cold War, India followed the policy of Non-Alignment, which aimed to avoid alignment with either the US-led or Soviet-led blocs. This policy was rooted in the desire to preserve sovereignty, promote peace, and support newly independent states.

In the post-Cold War era, the rigid bipolar structure disappeared, and globalization increased economic and strategic interdependence. As a result, India gradually shifted from non-alignment to multi-alignment. Multi-alignment involves engaging simultaneously with multiple major powers and regional groupings—such as the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, BRICS, and the Quad—based on issue-specific interests. This shift reflects a pragmatic adaptation of strategic autonomy to a more complex and multipolar world.

Theoretical Perspectives

Realism: From a realist perspective, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is driven by national interest, power, and security considerations. India seeks to maximize its autonomy to avoid dependence on any single power and to maintain flexibility in an anarchic international system.

Strategic-Culture: Strategic culture emphasizes the role of historical experiences, values, and norms in shaping foreign policy. India's emphasis on autonomy is influenced by its colonial past, commitment to sovereignty, and long-standing belief in independent decision-making. These historical experiences continue to shape India's cautious approach to alliances.

Pragmatism: Pragmatism focuses on practical outcomes rather than ideological commitments. India's shift toward multi-alignment reflects a pragmatic strategy that prioritizes economic growth, security cooperation, and diplomatic influence. India engages with different powers as circumstances require, without abandoning its core principle of strategic autonomy.

Historical Background

India's Foreign Policy during the Cold War

During the Cold War period (1947–1991), India adopted the policy of **Non-Alignment** under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. The main objective was to maintain independence from the two rival power blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. India emphasized principles such as sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, and opposition to military alliances.

India played a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), promoting cooperation among newly independent states. While India maintained closer ties with the Soviet Union in certain areas—particularly in defence and

diplomatic support—it avoided formal military alliances. This approach allowed India to preserve its strategic autonomy while navigating Cold War power politics.

Post-Cold War Adjustments (1991 Economic Reforms)

The end of the Cold War brought significant changes to the international system, including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the United States. Simultaneously, India faced a severe balance of payments crisis in 1991, which led to major economic reforms.

These reforms marked India's shift toward economic liberalization, privatization, and globalization. As India integrated more deeply into the global economy, its foreign policy also became more outward-looking and pragmatic. India expanded diplomatic and economic engagement with the United States, Europe, East Asia, and international institutions, while continuing its traditional ties with Russia.

Continuity and Change in Policy Approach

Despite these changes, there has been significant continuity in India's foreign policy. The core principle of strategic autonomy—freedom of independent decision-making—has remained intact. India continues to avoid formal military alliances and seeks to balance relations with multiple major powers.

At the same time, change is evident in India's increased global engagement and willingness to form strategic partnerships. Unlike the ideological non-alignment of the Cold War, contemporary Indian foreign policy is more flexible, interest-driven, and issue-based. This blend of continuity and change reflects India's adaptation to a transformed global order while preserving its fundamental foreign policy principles.

India's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

Key Determinants

Globalization: Globalization has made economic and technological cooperation central to India's foreign policy. For example, India's active role in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and G20 highlights its engagement with global economic governance. India's participation in international climate agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord also reflects how global challenges shape its diplomacy.

Economic-Growth: India's growing economy has strengthened its global influence. For instance, India has signed trade and investment agreements with countries like Japan, Australia, and the European Union to attract foreign investment and technology. Strategic partnerships with the United States have expanded in areas such as defence trade, digital technology, and energy cooperation, showing how economic interests guide foreign policy decisions.

Security-Challenges: Security concerns remain a major driver of India's foreign policy. Border tensions with China, particularly after the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan Valley clash (2020), have shaped India's strategic outlook. Similarly, cross-border terrorism has influenced India's relations with Pakistan. In response, India has strengthened defence cooperation with countries like the US, France, and Israel and increased focus on maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

Shift towards Proactive Global Engagement

India's foreign policy in the 21st century shows a clear shift

toward proactive engagement. The formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, Japan, and Australia is a key example of India's active role in regional security. India's Act East Policy has deepened ties with ASEAN countries through trade, connectivity projects, and security cooperation.

India's leadership in the G20, including hosting the G20 Summit, and its continued contribution to UN peacekeeping missions demonstrate its growing role in global governance and international peace efforts.

Role of Leadership and Domestic Factors

Leadership: Strong political leadership has played an important role in shaping India's external relations. High-level diplomatic engagements, such as frequent bilateral summits, outreach to the Indian diaspora, and emphasis on strategic partnerships, have increased India's global presence. For example, initiatives like Neighbourhood First Policy reflect leadership-driven regional diplomacy.

Domestic Factors: Domestic priorities strongly influence foreign policy choices. Programs such as Make in India aim to attract foreign investment and boost manufacturing, linking domestic economic goals with international partnerships. The concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) seeks to reduce dependency while continuing global engagement. Additionally, India's large diaspora has become an asset in strengthening relations with countries like the US, UK, and Gulf states.

Strategic Autonomy in Practice

India's strategic autonomy is most clearly visible in how it manages relations with major powers. India deepens cooperation where interests converge while avoiding binding military alliances, thereby preserving independent decision-making.

Relations with the United States

India-US relations have expanded significantly in the 21st century, especially in defence, technology, and economic cooperation. Examples include:

- The India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005), which ended India's nuclear isolation without India joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- Signing of foundational defence agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA, enabling logistics sharing and intelligence cooperation.
- Cooperation within the Quad on maritime security, disaster relief, and supply chains.

Despite growing ties, India has not entered a formal military alliance with the US and maintains freedom of action in its foreign policy, reflecting strategic autonomy.

Relations with Russia

Russia remains a long-standing and trusted strategic partner, particularly in defence and energy. Examples include:

- Continued purchase of Russian defence equipment, such as the S-400 missile defence system, despite pressure from Western countries.
- Cooperation in nuclear energy, including the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project.
- Diplomatic engagement through forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

India's ability to maintain strong ties with Russia while improving relations with the US demonstrates its balanced and autonomous approach.

Relations with China

India's relationship with China is complex, involving both cooperation and competition.

- Economic cooperation is evident through trade and participation in institutions like BRICS and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).
- At the same time, border disputes and security tensions, particularly after the Galwan Valley clash (2020), have led India to strengthen military preparedness and regional partnerships.
- India has opposed initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to sovereignty concerns, especially regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

This dual approach shows India's effort to engage China diplomatically while safeguarding its national security.

Managing Partnerships without Formal Alliances

India's strategic autonomy is best reflected in its ability to form issue-based partnerships without entering formal alliances. Examples include:

- Participation in the Quad, which focuses on cooperation rather than a military alliance.
- Simultaneous membership in BRICS, SCO, and close engagement with Western powers.
- Independent positions on global issues, such as calling for dialogue and diplomacy during the Russia-Ukraine conflict rather than aligning fully with any side.

Through this flexible, multi-aligned strategy, India maintains autonomy while maximizing diplomatic, economic, and strategic benefits.

Regional and Global Engagement

Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad

India's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects its growing regional and global ambitions. The Indo-Pacific has become central to India's foreign policy due to its importance for trade, maritime security, and regional stability. India emphasizes a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. A key example is India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States, Japan, and Australia. The Quad focuses on:

- Maritime security and freedom of navigation
- Disaster relief and humanitarian assistance
- Critical technologies and resilient supply chains

Importantly, the Quad is not a formal military alliance, allowing India to cooperate on regional security while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Role in Multilateral Forums

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa): India uses BRICS to promote cooperation among emerging economies. Examples include:

- Support for the New Development Bank (NDB) as an alternative source of development finance
- Coordination on global economic reforms and South-South cooperation

G20: India's active role in the G20 highlights its global economic leadership. Hosting the G20 Summit showcased India's ability to set agendas on issues like inclusive growth, digital public infrastructure, and sustainable development.

SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation): Through the SCO, India engages with Central Asia, Russia, and China on regional security, counter-terrorism, and connectivity while maintaining dialogue with rivals in a multilateral setting.

United Nations (UN): India is one of the largest contributors

to UN peacekeeping missions, demonstrating its commitment to global peace and security. India also consistently advocates for UN Security Council reform to better represent developing countries.

India's Leadership in the Global South:

India has positioned itself as a leading voice of the Global South, representing the interests of developing countries in global forums. Examples include:

- Launch of the Voice of the Global South Summit, aimed at highlighting development concerns of poorer nations
- Long-standing development assistance and capacity-building programs in Africa, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean region
- Advocacy for issues such as climate justice, access to technology, and equitable global governance

India's emphasis on development cooperation rather than dominance strengthens its credibility and leadership among developing nations.

Key Challenges

Border Disputes and Security Threats

One of the most serious challenges to India's foreign policy is managing persistent **border** disputes and security threats. The unresolved border with China, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has led to periodic tensions. The Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan Valley clash (2020) highlighted the risks of military escalation and have forced India to increase troop deployments, infrastructure development, and defence preparedness along its northern borders.

In addition, India faces security threats from cross-border terrorism, especially in relation to Pakistan. Attacks such as the Uri attack (2016) and Pulwama attack (2019) have influenced India's diplomatic and security posture, leading to stronger counter-terrorism measures and international diplomatic efforts to isolate terror networks.

Maritime security is another growing concern, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region, where piracy, illegal activities, and increased naval presence of external powers pose challenges to India's strategic interests.

Balancing Great Power Competition

The intensifying rivalry between major powers—especially between the United States and China—poses a complex challenge for India. On one hand, India shares strategic concerns with the US regarding China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, China remains one of India's largest trading partners.

India must also manage its long-standing partnership with Russia while strengthening ties with Western countries. For example, India's continued purchase of Russian defense equipment, such as the S-400 system, even amid Western sanctions, illustrates the difficulty of balancing competing relationships. Maintaining strategic autonomy while engaging with rival powers requires careful diplomacy to avoid being drawn into rigid power blocs.

Economic Constraints and Global Uncertainties

Despite strong growth, India faces economic constraints that limit its foreign policy options. Dependence on energy imports, vulnerability to global supply chain disruptions, and fluctuations in global markets affect India's economic security. The impact of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and global inflationary pressures demonstrated how

external shocks can strain domestic economies and foreign relations.

Global uncertainties such as climate change, technological competition, and geopolitical conflicts (e.g., the Russia–Ukraine war) also create diplomatic and economic challenges. For instance, rising energy prices and disruptions in food supply chains have forced India to adopt flexible policies to protect domestic interests while maintaining international commitments.

Overall Assessment

These challenges underline the complexity of India's foreign policy in the 21st century. India must continuously adapt its strategies to protect national security, maintain economic stability, and preserve strategic autonomy in an increasingly uncertain and competitive global environment.

This research paper has examined India's foreign policy in the 21st century with a focus on the concept of strategic autonomy and its practical application. It highlighted how India's foreign policy has evolved from Cold War–era non-alignment to a more flexible strategy of multi-alignment. Despite significant changes in the global order, strategic autonomy remains a core principle guiding India's external relations. India has expanded its global engagement by strengthening ties with major powers, participating actively in multilateral forums, and asserting its role in regional and global affairs, while avoiding formal military alliances.

Reassessment of Strategic Autonomy in a Changing World

In today's multipolar and interconnected world, strategic autonomy has acquired a broader and more pragmatic meaning. It no longer implies distance from global power politics but rather the ability to engage widely while preserving independent decision-making. India's approach reflects a careful balance between cooperation and caution—engaging with competing powers such as the United States, Russia, and China based on issue-specific interests. This reassessment shows that strategic autonomy is not static; it is a dynamic strategy that adapts to changing geopolitical, economic, and security realities.

India's foreign policy in the 21st century demonstrates a confident and adaptive approach to global engagement. While challenges such as border disputes, great power competition, and global uncertainties persist, India has leveraged its growing economic strength, diplomatic flexibility, and strategic partnerships to enhance its international standing. The continued emphasis on strategic autonomy enables India to safeguard national interests while contributing to global stability and cooperation. Ultimately, India's ability to sustain this balance will determine its success as a rising power in an increasingly complex global order.

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