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## Understanding India's Evolving Policy of Strategic Autonomy

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### SYNOPSIS

*Analysts have ascribed India's enduring engagement with Russia as an outcome of its intrinsic preference for the policy of strategic autonomy. This article contends that the policy of strategic autonomy has evolved over time, driven by shifts in the geopolitical environment. It is not an inherent and unchanging hallmark of Indian foreign policy. By understanding these drivers, one can better understand India's engagement with Russia.*

### COMMENTARY

Much to the chagrin of the West, India abstained on multiple UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and refused to publicly criticise Putin's actions. Moreover, India has purchased Russian oil despite the threat of US sanctions and continued to engage Russia diplomatically. These actions have undermined the West's efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and economically. As a result, some analysts have [suggested](#) that India may be an "unreliable" partner of the West.

Other analysts have [ascribed](#) India's foreign policy decisions to its desire to follow approaches that increase its ability to manoeuvre diplomatically and strategically. India prefers an international system with multiple independent poles which it can engage on common interests. This approach has been variously called non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and more recently multi-alignment. To achieve this objective, Russia remains a critical partner. Russia's existence as an independent pole in the international system increases India's space to manoeuvre between different poles and secure gains for itself. This [approach](#) or [strategy](#) is seen as inherent to how Indian policymakers view the world, and is considered an obstacle to a tighter strategic embrace between India and the United States, while allowing Russia to maintain a close relationship.

But these interpretations miss the strategic logic underpinning both India's engagement with Russia and the policy of strategic autonomy. Russia has a place in India's strategy to address its China challenge, as do India's Western partners. Moreover, India's policy of strategic autonomy has evolved in response to geopolitical changes with nuances in each iteration. Understanding the geopolitical outlook the policy is responding to, and each country's place in its strategy, can help better interpret India's decisions. Ultimately, India does see a strategic logic to engaging Russia. But given the nature of the challenges it faces today, the West will continue to remain India's critical partner.

### **Strategic Autonomy in Indian Foreign Policy**

The policy of strategic autonomy has traditionally been in response to key geopolitical events that altered the dynamics of international politics. Such events created new sources of threats or risks for India, and its strategic autonomy policy was a means to cope with these risks.

The first geopolitical event was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. At this point, the world became unequivocally unipolar, and India lost its principal great power patron. Moreover, the United States had put forward an international agenda that appeared expansionist and intrusive from India's perspective. Global institutions, with the West's backing, also became increasingly activist and intrusive. Their non-proliferation agenda was at odds with India's nuclear programme, and the West was insistent on playing a conflict mediation role on the Kashmir issue. Both were key Indian national interests on which it found compromise unacceptable. Meanwhile, India still [saw](#) the United States as potentially a key partner that could help it achieve key foreign policy objectives.

In response, India hedged against the United States even while engaging it. To be sure, the relationship between the two countries improved at the turn of the century and accelerated dramatically under the Bush administration. But while engaging the United States, India also invested in smaller coalitions of middle powers to hedge against the negative externalities of American unipolarity. India was increasingly focused on organisations like the Group of 20 (G20), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa). A new outlook for a reformed and democratic world order also drove India, Russia, and China to engage as a distinct triangular partnership beginning in 2002.

The next disruption came in the early years of the Obama administration in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The Obama administration approached its relationship with China in the hope of creating a great power compact through [a so-called G2 condominium](#). In India, the deal was met with anxiety. The thought of being abandoned by the United States through a deal which excluded them caused some introspection in Indian policy circles. Moreover, India had to confront a rising China with which it had fundamental conflict of interests. India did not want to find itself caught in a competition with the possibility of being abandoned.

Thus, the second iteration of strategic autonomy looked to recalibrate its relationship with the United States, as well as balance ties between the United States and China. Until that point, it was felt that India had moved too close to the United States. Thus,

it essentially called for equidistance between India and the two great powers, and for creating space for a political settlement between India and China. The policy was to assuage China's fear of encirclement and mitigate any security dilemma from developing. As a result of this policy, there was a marked decline in the pace of the India-US relationship.

Therefore, the policy of strategic autonomy has evolved with key geopolitical developments, changes in the state of international politics, and shifts in the global balance of power. The first iteration occurred against the backdrop of unipolarity, while the second iteration came along during the rise of China.



India's policy of strategic autonomy has traditionally been in response to key geopolitical events that altered the dynamics of international politics. *Image source: Unsplash.*

### **Strategic Autonomy Today**

In the second half of the 2010s, China steadily emerged as India's strategic rival. The power differential between India and China continued to grow while China undertook unilateral actions to shape the Asian order. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it sought to place itself at the centre of an Asian order at the expense of other middle powers. These actions negatively impacted India's security environment.

As then-Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar [noted](#), the BRI was a unilateral initiative undertaken without consultation of any external governments. The key threat to India is that the BRI looked to establish an order across the Indo-Pacific that reflected China's preferences and rules. Such a system would essentially undercut India's economic and political competitiveness, excluding India from the region's initiatives.

The BRI was, and still is, being implemented against the backdrop of international balance of power moving towards bipolarity. This trend began soon after Russia's annexation of Crimea. The ensuing Western sanctions forced Russia and China into a closer partnership. The trend has only accelerated following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its dwindling power due to Ukraine's stiff resistance. It is [likely](#) that, in the long run, Russia will emerge as a junior partner in the relationship and be more dependent on China.

For India, China's expansionism and belligerence is the predominant challenge. The policy of multi-alignment was meant to pursue several objectives, one among which was to [try](#) and [cope](#) with China's growing influence. This is the third iteration of the policy of strategic autonomy. India hoped to diversify its engagement with several middle powers in the Indo-Pacific to build broad support for India's geopolitical positions and counter China's influence. In line with this objective, India engaged Russia as well, to keep it from falling firmly into China's embrace. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Russia in 2019 and ensuing cooperation focused on the Russian Far East and the Eurasian landmass. The two countries agreed to cooperate on connectivity projects and economic investment in Russia's far east regions. These priorities were [reiterated](#) during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia in 2024.

India believes its security environment will deteriorate significantly if China dominates the Eurasian landmass in the wake of Russia's declining power. India's engagement with Russia is likely aimed at undercutting Chinese influence and precluding a full-fledged Sino-Russian alliance. However, to what extent India is successful remains to be seen. Only the West, and the United States in particular, has the wherewithal to counter China's assault on India's autonomy. India's increasing policy shifts to this end suggest that the West will remain India's predominant partner in countering the China challenge.

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