



The Global Power Triangle and India's Strategic Autonomy: An Analysis of the Multi-Alignment Doctrine (2020–2026)

Abstract

The third decade of the twenty-first century is witnessing an unprecedented reconfiguration of global power. The period 2020–2026 has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia – Ukraine war, the Israel – Palestine conflict, the Israel – Iran conflict, the America – Iran conflict and intense US–China technological rivalry. These events have eroded American unipolarity and accelerated the emergence of a multipolar order. This paper analyzes the bilateral and trilateral dynamics among the United States, Russia, and China, examining how India—as a rising "system-shaper" and "Soft power" is safeguarding its national interests through the doctrine of "multi-alignment" and principled pragmatism.

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1. Introduction

The international order established after World War II i.e. the conflict between Russia and America with the Cold War was based on ideological war between capitalism and communism. USSR and USA influenced the Asian and African countries who were undeveloped and developing in the manner of economy and political establishment. In this era the three major groups influenced the world. One is Russia, second is America and the third one is Non-aligned countries. After the disintegration of USSR the world became the American dominant "unipolar world". The end of the Cold War has given way to a world where middle powers like India are exercising greater strategic agency. The post-1991 international order, built upon American hegemony, the United Nations, and Bretton Woods institutions, has experienced significant strain during the 2020-2026 period. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for economic and supply-chain re-evaluation, while the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war fundamentally challenged the European security architecture. These developments have accelerated the transition toward a multipolar order where powers like India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Türkiye occupy influential roles. This research addresses the core question: How does India maintain strategic autonomy while navigating the US-Russia-China triangle? The paper argues that India has moved beyond being a "rule-follower" to becoming a "system-shaper," utilizing its activism in forums like G-20, BRICS, and QUAD to bridge ideological divides.

2. Literature Review

The existing scholars on the global power triangle provide a theoretical foundation for this study.

- **The Global Power Triangle:** Henry Kissinger's *World Order* (2014) highlights that stability requires a consensus-based rule system. John Mearsheimer (2001) provides a structural realist perspective, positioning that conflict between rising powers and established hegemons is an inevitable feature of international politics.
- **Russia-China Dynamics:** Bobo Lo (2008) in *Russia and the New World Disorder* examines the limitations and inherent competition underlying the Russia-China partnership, while Angela Stent (2022) provides critical context regarding the geopolitical shifts following the Russia-Ukraine war.
- **Indian Foreign Policy:** External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (2020) in *The India Way* articulates the "multi-alignment" doctrine, describing it as a practical, interest-based evolution of Nehruvian non-alignment. Scholars like C. Raja Mohan (2015), Harsh V. Pant (2022), and Ashley Tellis (2021) have further documented how India leverages soft power and tactical neutrality to navigate the current geopolitical uncertainty.
- **Gap in Literature:** While substantial research exists on the general power triangle, there is a specific need for an integrated analysis of the 2020-2026 period in Hindi and English academic discourse, particularly regarding India's evolution from

a "rule-follower" to a "system-shaper".

3. Dynamics of the Power Triangle

The trilateral relationship between the U.S., Russia, and China serves as the primary axis of contemporary geopolitical friction:

- **U.S.-Russia Tensions:** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, America became the sole supreme power in the world, which led to the rapid spread of capitalism and liberal democracy. Many Eastern European countries turned towards Western institution, such as NATO and European Union. The Cold War tensions between Russia and America eased. The relationship between the United States and Russia after 1991, initial optimistic Cooperation to an aggressive, modern cold War rivalry. In the era of 1991 to 1999, the relationship was generally born under Russian president Boris Yeltsin and US president Bill Clinton. The US actively supported Russia's shift towards a market economy and democratic reforms. Both nations collaborated to secure and dismantle the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal left in former Republics like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. The relation began to sour due to Russia's economic collapse, the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and Russia posed as a strong opposition to the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. After the 9/11 attacks Putin was the first foreign leader to offer support to US president, George W. Bush, sharing intelligence and allowing US bases in central Asia for the war in Afghanistan. The relationship hit its lowest post Cold War point

in August 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia . In 2014 Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, the US and its Allies imposed severe economic sanctions and suspended Russia from the G 18. Thus the return of geopolitical conflict between America and Russia began. The 2022 military conflict in Ukraine solidified the shift towards "Cold War 2.0," characterized by aggressive sanction regimes and the freezing of Russian central bank assets. This has triggered a global "de-dollarization" movement, where nations seek alternative payment mechanisms like CIPS or BRICS Pay.

- **U.S.-China Strategic Competition:** This rivalry has transcended trade, focusing heavily on technology (AI, semiconductors, and quantum computing) and regional security (the Indo-Pacific). The U.S. has moved from "strategic ambiguity" to "strategic clarity" regarding the protection of regional interests, while China continues to challenge the status quo through initiatives like the Belt and Road (BRI). Both nations are aggressively restructuring supply chains. The US is focused on "friend-shoring" critical manufacturing to allied nation, while China seeks to insulate its domestic economy from western financial architecture. Taiwan remains the most volatile issue between the US and China. Beijing explicitly views any move towards Taiwan's independence as a trigger for military conflict and fiercely protests US arms sales to the island. Tensions have recently surged due to US sanctions, targeting major Chinese petrochemical, conglomerates

and dozens of shipping companies. These entities were targeted for purchasing and transporting Iranian crude oil in violation of US embargoes.

- **The Russia-China Partnership:** The "No-Limits Partnership" established in 2022 has created a new geopolitical axis, despite inherent contradictions in their interests in Central Asia and the Arctic. Formerly declared as "not allies, but better than allies," is the relationship has drastically accelerated to counter western geopolitical pressure and financial sanctions. China has effectively become Russia's economic lifeline, supplying vital consumer and industrial goods. Russia has shifted massive oil and gas exports away from Europe and towards China. To completely bypass Western banking network and insulate themselves from sanctions, nearly all bilateral trade is now settled in Yuan and Rubles rather than the US dollar. In a major intelligence revelation, declassified documents revealed that top level Russian and Chinese general personally approved covert military Cross training. The two nations regularly conduct high profile, coordinated Naval and aerial drills in the sea of Japan, the East China sea and the Arctic. They leverage anti-western coalition through expanded diplomatic forums like BRICS and Shanghai cooperation Organisation to build competing axis to influence across the global South.

India's Multi-Alignment Doctrine

India's foreign policy, described by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, as "principled pragmatism,"

replaces the passive non-alignment of the past with active, interest-based engagement. India's multi dimensional doctrine is a whole of government grand strategy that unifies military convergence, strategic multi alignment in socio-economic transformation. Today India's policy shifts to proactive civilisational power utilising all aspects of national capacity to secure its interest across physical, virtual and socio-economic spaces.

4. Multi domain operations (MDO)

India's defence strategy has undergone a profound shift to counter modern multi front threats. Under the integrated defence staff, the framework uses military capabilities across six distinct frontiers : land, sea air space, cyber, and the cognitive domain. It transports the military away from isolated service specific warfare into a fight command structure that synchronizes assets and rapidly addresses cyber and Grey zone threats. India has also issued dedicated doctrine for cyberspace operation and military space.

Multi Vector Engagement

India actively engages with multiple global power centres simultaneously, to serve its own national interest without getting boxed into bilateral rivalries. India maintains defense ties with the US (e.g., iCET, MQ-9B drones) while preserving historical military and energy dependencies on Russia (e.g., S-400, discounted crude oil). India promotes a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific through the QUAD, distinct

from the American perspective, focusing on ASEAN centrality.

Global South Leadership:

India strategically trying for global South leadership is driven by a non reciprocal consultative partnership model designed to amplify the developmental, economic and climate concerned of developing nations in a polarised world. Rather than using top down or debt heavy dominance, India project itself as a “Vishwa Bandhu”, (friend of the world) serving as a functional bridge between the global north and South. India uses multilateral forums to platform under-represented states successfully securing permanent membership for the African union in the G20 through recurring forums like the voice of global South Summit, India champions and agenda of “4 R” Respond, Recognize, Respect, and Reform to mandate human centered globalisation. Through initiatives like "Vaccine Maitri" and leading the G-20 presidency, India has positioned itself as the voice of the developing world.

Performing the global South first diplomacy transitioning beyond “Act East” towards an explicit “Global South first” policy, linking health security, critical mineral, partnership and alternative development funds across Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. Acting as first responder by providing lines of credit and essential medical supplies during humanitarian crisis, heavily drawing, contrast against Western vaccine nationalism.

5. Evolution into a "System-Shaper"

1947 to 1962, India was a newly independent and economically fragile country focused on decolonisation and anti colonial solidarity. India chose strategic distance from both super power blocks through non-alignment, though remaining a consumer of western defined international system. After 1962 to 1991, due to regional conflicts, India shifted from idealistic diplomacy to pragmatic survival security facts such as the Indo-Soviet treaty and the 1974 nuclear tests were leveraged to protect territorial sovereignty rather than to shape external global rules. From 1991 to 2008 India focused on economic liberalisation, initiated the look East policy, and followed global trade rules by integrating with the world trade organisation and repairing ties with the west. India built the economic foundation required to be taken seriously as a global player after 2008 to 2020. Solidified by the “Indo-US civil nuclear deal” in 2008, India transacted into a global swing power. It became a vocal negotiator in climate change forums and funded alternative architecture like BRICS to challenge unilateral global governance. After 2020 India now sets agendas. It has moved past simple institutional obstruction to building its own global platforms, rewriting international trade routes, and exporting scalable governance solutions to the world. India's role has expanded through deliberate institutional activism:

- **Defense Indigenization:** Moving from the world's largest defense importer to an exporter (e.g., BrahMos missile sales to the

Philippines), India has bolstered its strategic independence.

- **G-20 leadership:** India used its presidency to shift the geopolitical agenda towards the global South, orchestrating the permanent inclusion of the African union. India drives the western align chord and the duration focused SCO, BRICS system to prevent any single power block from dominating global rules.
- **Technological Leadership:** India is leveraging its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and space sector (e.g., Chandrayaan-3, Artemis Accords) to set global standards rather than just adopting them, with open source alternatives to western corporate monopoly or China's surveillance Tech.
- **Institutional Reform:** India continues to advocate for "reformed multilateralism," challenging the 20th-century structure of the UN Security Council.
- **Idea educational and normative leadership:** India with its soft power policy, introduced a new concept into global governance rather than adopting existing western frameworks and founded the International Solar Alliance(ISA) and the coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure(CDRI) positioning itself as a leader in green energy deployment.

6. Conclusion

As of 2026, India's "multi-alignment" policy has proven resilient. By maintaining selective engagement with conflicting power centers, India has avoided forced binary choices while advancing the vision of "Viksit Bharat 2047". The future of India's foreign policy depends on its ability to continue balancing these complex relationships while scaling its domestic economic and technological power. In the words of Dr. S Jaishankar(India's Foreign Minister) " The rise of India will be determined by India. It will be determined by our strength, not by others."

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