



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: SHIFT FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO MULTI-ALIGNMENT

Dr. Sanjay Mohanty

Head, Department of Political Science, Maharishi College of Natural Law, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

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*Corresponding author:

Dr. Sanjay Mohanty

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ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy has undergone a paradigmatic transition from the Nehruvian doctrine of Non-Alignment to a contemporary framework of Multi-Alignment. The Cold War context, post-colonial identity, and quest for strategic autonomy shaped Non-Alignment as India's principal diplomatic instrument from 1947 to 1991. The end of bipolarity, economic liberalization, nuclearization, and the rise of China redefined India's external environment, compelling a recalibration toward strategic partnerships across competing power blocs. This paper traces the historical evolution, doctrinal shifts, and institutional drivers behind India's move from Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment. It analyses key milestones: Look East Policy, nuclear tests of 1998, Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and India's positioning in BRICS, SCO, G20, and I2U2. The paper adopted mixed-method approach relying both on qualitative historical analytical study and quantitative factual data in the course of the research. It collected relevant data from both primary and secondary sources. The study concluded that Multi-Alignment is not an abandonment of Non-Alignment but its twenty-first-century adaptation — a flexible, interest-driven strategy to maximize autonomy, economic growth, and security in a multipolar world.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy reflects a nation's core interests, identity, and capabilities. For post-colonial states, it also serves as an instrument of sovereignty assertion. Despite different variables, India's foreign policy since 1947 has been anchored in one constant: the pursuit of strategic autonomy.¹ Yet the methods of achieving autonomy have evolved with the international system and changing dynamics of the geopolitical landscape. The first phase, 1947–1991, was dominated by the policy of Non-Alignment. Conceived by Jawaharlal Nehru, V.K. Krishna Menon, and other early architects, Non-Alignment sought to avoid bloc politics while retaining relative autonomy and moral voice on decolonization, disarmament, and racial equality.² The second phase, post-1991, witnessed gradual dilution of Non-Alignment's doctrinal rigidity. Economic reforms, the collapse of the USSR, and India's rising material capabilities and economic growth necessitated diversified partnerships.³ Since the 2000s, scholars and policymakers describe India's approach as "Multi-Alignment," "Strategic Hedging," or "Plurilateral Engagement."⁴ External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar explicitly states that India is "engaging America, managing China, cultivating Europe, reassuring Russia, bringing Japan into play, drawing neighbours in, extending the neighbourhood and expanding traditional constituencies of support."⁵

This paper examines how and why this shift occurred, what Multi-Alignment entails, and its implications for global order.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Non-Alignment: Ideology and Practice, 1947–1991: Non-Alignment was both a moral principle and a pragmatic strategy. Ideologically, it rejected power blocs as extensions of imperialism and war. Nehru argued at the 1955 Bandung Conference that "the preservation of peace forms the central aim of India's policy."⁶ Practically, it allowed India to receive aid from both the U.S. and USSR, avoid entanglement in conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, and lead the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that was founded in Belgrade in 1961.⁷ However, Non-Alignment was never isolationism. India signed the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, accepted U.S. PL-480 food aid, and intervened militarily in Bangladesh in 1971.⁸ Scholars thus describe Indian Non-Alignment as "tilted" or "qualified."⁹ It is to be noted that the core of India's policy was freedom of choice and safeguarding the national interest, not equidistance or isolationism.

Strategic Autonomy: The Enduring Constant: Strategic autonomy — the ability to take decisions on vital interests without external veto — links Non-Alignment and Multi-

Alignment.¹⁰ C. Raja Mohan argues that India's goal since 1947 has been "to avoid alliances that compromise independence," but the definition of "compromise" changes with power.¹¹ A weak India in 1950 needed distance from blocs; a stronger India in 2025 needs engagement with multiple blocs to shape outcomes.

Multi-Alignment: A Framework for Multipolarity: Multi-Alignment denotes simultaneous, issue-based partnerships with competing powers without formal alliances.¹² Unlike Non-Alignment's emphasis on political equidistance, Multi-Alignment emphasizes economic and security convergence wherever interests overlap. It accepts "exclusive partnerships on inclusive issues" — e.g., Quad for maritime security, BRICS for financial reform, SCO for Central Asia, I2U2 for tech.¹³

HISTORICAL DRIVERS OF THE SHIFT

End of the Cold War and Economic Crisis, 1991: The USSR's collapse removed India's principal defence and diplomatic partner. Simultaneously, a balance-of-payments crisis forced IMF-led liberalization.¹⁴ The 1991 economic reforms internationalized India's economy, increasing stakes in global trade, energy, and technology flows. Non-Alignment's economic self-reliance model gave way to global integration.¹⁵

Rise of China and Post-Pokhran Realities, 1998–2008: India's 1998 nuclear tests redefined its security status. The tests were justified as a response to a China-Pakistan nuclear nexus.¹⁶ Subsequent U.S. sanctions and eventual Indo-U.S. rapprochement via the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement signalled Washington's acceptance of India as a de facto nuclear power.¹⁷ The 123 Agreement ended India's nuclear isolation without requiring NPT signature — a classic Multi-Alignment outcome that gave India strategic gains from the U.S. while maintaining defence ties with Russia.¹⁸

2008 Financial Crisis and Multipolarity: The 2008 crisis weakened Western financial dominance and elevated BRICS. India leveraged this to demand IMF quota reforms and launch the New Development Bank.¹⁹ Multipolarity became structural, not rhetorical, making bloc-based Non-Alignment increasingly obsolete.

Galwan, Ukraine, and Strategic Hedging, 2020–2024: The 2020 Galwan clash with China pushed India closer to the U.S. and Quad, yet India abstained on UN votes condemning Russia's 2022 Ukraine invasion and continued oil imports from Moscow.²⁰ This dual-track approach epitomises Multi-Alignment: counter China with the West, maintain defence and energy ties with Russia, and lead Global South forums like G20 2023.²¹

PILLARS OF MULTI-ALIGNMENT IN PRACTICE

United States and the West: Technology and Indo-Pacific: India-U.S. ties moved from "estranged democracies" to "engaged democracies and major defence partners."²² Initiatives include COMCASA, BECA, iCET for critical technologies, and co-production of GE-F414 engines. With EU, India negotiates an FTA and collaborates on green hydrogen.²³ Yet India resists NATO-like commitments, preserving its autonomy.

Russia: Defence, Energy, and Legacy Trust: Russia supplies approximately 45% of India's arms and offers discounted crude.²⁴ India's refusal to condemn Russia in its ongoing conflict with Ukraine reflects both defence dependence and a worldview that rejects Western "moral hierarchy" in international law.²⁵ The Vladivostok-Chennai corridor and Arctic LNG cooperation show continued engagement between India and Russia.

China: Competition and Selective Engagement: China is India's largest trading partner yet principal security threat. Despite the border disputes, violent Galwan clash, and rivalry, both India and China have continued their engagements at different levels. Multi-Alignment means infrastructure bans on Huawei, FDI restrictions, and Quad balancing, alongside BRICS and SCO membership.²⁶ The goal is "conengagement" — contain + engage.²⁷

Global South and Middle Powers: India's G20 Presidency in 2023, Voice of Global South Summits, and Vaccine Maitri frame India as a bridge between North and South.²⁸ Moreover, partnerships with UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel in I2U2 and with France, Australia, Japan diversify the potential risks.²⁹

Neighbourhood First and Act East: From SAARC stagnation to BIMSTEC and BBIN, India pursues sub-regionalism. Act East links Northeast India to ASEAN via Trilateral Highway and SAGAR doctrine.³⁰

DOCTRINAL INNOVATIONS: FROM PANCHSHEEL TO SAGAR

Panchsheel to Gujral Doctrine: Nehru's Panchsheel emphasized non-interference. The 1990s Gujral Doctrine offered unilateral concessions to neighbours without reciprocity.³¹ Both were consistent with Non-Alignment's moralism.

SAGAR, Indo-Pacific, and Rules-Based Order: PM Modi's 2015 SAGAR — Security and Growth for All in the Region — blends security, blue economy, and humanitarian aid.³² India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative supports ASEAN centrality but rejects Chinese "maritime silk road" coercion. India now speaks of "rules-based order," a shift from NAM's anti-hegemonic rhetoric.³³

CRITIQUES AND CHALLENGES OF MULTI-ALIGNMENT

Risk of Strategic Overstretch: Managing contradictory ties — e.g., Quad vs. BRICS, Israel vs. Iran — demands bureaucratic bandwidth and risks credibility loss.³⁴ Critics call it "multi-entanglement."³⁵

Domestic Capacity Constraints: Defence indigenization under Atmanirbhar Bharat remains incomplete; 65% of hardware is imported.³⁶ Economic reforms must sustain 7%+ growth to fund multi-aligned diplomacy.

Normative Ambiguity: Non-Alignment had moral clarity. Multi-Alignment is transactional, raising questions: What does India stand for beyond interests?³⁷ Jaishankar responds that "the world is not binary," but critics argue India needs a positive vision, not just balance.³⁸

China-Russia-U.S. Triangle: Deepening Russia-China ties and U.S.-China rivalry compress India's manoeuvring space. A Russia-China axis could limit India's leverage in SCO and BRICS.³⁹

CONCLUSION: MULTI-ALIGNMENT AS EVOLVING NON-ALIGNMENT

India's shift from Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment reflects adaptation, not rejection. The core objective — strategic autonomy — persists, but the instruments changed from avoidance to engagement. Non-Alignment was suited to a bipolar, resource-scarce India; Multi-Alignment suits a multipolar, aspirational India seeking to be a "leading power" rather than just a "balancing power."⁴⁰ Multi-Alignment is not an alliance system; it is a portfolio approach to risk and opportunity. Its success depends on economic growth, military modernization, and diplomatic agility. As the international order fragments, India's ability to "engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia" will test whether Multi-Alignment is sustainable strategy or transient tactic. For now, it represents India's most coherent response to twenty-first-century complexity.

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