

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: NAVIGATING THE US-RUSSIA-CHINA TRILEMMA IN INDIA'S 2026 FOREIGN POLICY

Vanshika Choudhary

UGC-NET Qualified (Political Science)

Alumna, Department of Political Science

Kanoria PG Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

**Abstract:** The global order in 2026 has transitioned into a state of "perpetual flux," characterized by intensified great-power rivalry, systemic technological fragmentation, and a significant erosion of the traditional boundaries between domestic economic stability and foreign policy objectives. In response to this increasingly volatile and fragmented system, India has articulated and operationalized a sophisticated doctrine of strategic autonomy. This doctrine represents a fundamental departure from the passive stances of classical non-alignment, favouring instead a proactive, interest-driven framework of issue-based multi-alignment. This paper conceptualizes India's contemporary foreign policy not as a mere collection of bilateral ties, but as a deliberate "architecture of strategic autonomy". This architecture is fundamentally structured around a complex geopolitical trilemma involving the United States, Russia, and China—three powers that exert contradictory yet unavoidable pressures on the Indian state. By analyzing the specific pillars of this strategy, this study examines:

- **Technological Cooperation:** The deepening of high-tech and defense ties with the West, specifically through the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET).
- **Energy Interdependence:** The pragmatic maintenance of energy and strategic links with Russia to ensure domestic stability and regional balance.
- **Calibrated Competition:** A multi-domain approach to managing the rise of China, combining economic resilience with defensive posturing.
- **Digital Diplomacy:** The leveraging of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) to build structural influence and provide a developmental alternative for the Global South.

Ultimately, the study argues that India is no longer merely a "middle power" reacting to global trends, but is emerging as an autonomous pole within a genuine multipolar order. By refusing the binary logic of Cold War-style alliances and instead choosing to engage on an issue-by-issue basis, India is redefining the role of a major power in the mid-21st century.

**Index Terms** - Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, India 2026, Great Power Competition, Digital Diplomacy, Multipolarity

## 1. INTRODUCTION-

The post-Cold War unipolar moment has decisively receded. The international system of 2026 is marked by revived geopolitical contestation, technological decoupling, and institutional reconfiguration. Great-power rivalry is no longer confined to military alliances; it now extends to semiconductor supply chains, artificial intelligence standards, digital infrastructure, and energy corridors. The post-Cold War era, once defined by the "unipolar moment" and the seemingly inevitable spread of liberal hegemony, has decisively receded into the annals of history. As we navigate the complexities of 2026, the international system is no longer characterized by a single center of gravity. Instead, the global landscape is marked by a profound sense of revived geopolitical contestation, a phenomenon that has moved beyond mere diplomatic friction into the very bedrock of global commerce and technology. The era of "flat world" globalization, where economic efficiency trumped sovereign security, has been replaced by a period of technological decoupling and institutional reconfiguration.

In this new epoch, great-power rivalry is no longer confined to the traditional theaters of military alliances or territorial disputes. While the spectre of kinetic conflict remains, the primary battlegrounds have shifted to the invisible architectures of the modern age. The competition now extends into the intricacies of semiconductor supply chains, the setting of artificial intelligence (AI) standards, the resilience of digital infrastructure, and the security of energy corridors. Influence is measured not just by blue-water navies, but by the ability to control the "chokepoints" of the global digital and green economies.

As scholars note, the twenty-first century order is increasingly defined by renewed power competition. One policy assessment observes that "the return of great-power competition is reshaping global politics" [1]. This structural shift has profound implications for middle The Return of Great-Power Competition

As contemporary scholars of international relations note, the twenty-first-century order is increasingly defined by a "return to history"—a period where renewed power competition dictates the behavior of states. One critical policy assessment observes that

“the return of great-power competition is reshaping global politics,” suggesting that the cooperative frameworks of the late 20th century are being hollowed out by zero-sum logic.

This structural shift has profound and often existential implications for middle powers. In a world bifurcated by the rivalry between established and rising giants, the space for independent action appears to be shrinking. For nations that refuse to be relegated to the status of "client states" or "swing states," the challenge is to build a foreign policy

architecture that can withstand the tectonic shifts of systemic rivalry. India's foreign policy objective remains the preservation of sovereign decision-making authority. The Ministry of External Affairs describes this doctrine succinctly:

“Strategic autonomy means India's ability to make independent decisions in foreign policy and defense without external pressures or alliance obligations.” [2]

#### India's Doctrine: The Evolution of Sovereign Decision-Making

At the heart of India's response to this fragmentation is the preservation of sovereign decision-making authority. This is not a new impulse, but its application has undergone a radical transformation. Since its independence, India has guarded its "strategic autonomy" with fierce ideological consistency, though the methods of achieving it have shifted with the global tides.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) describes this doctrine succinctly in its recent communications:

“Strategic autonomy means India's ability to make independent decisions in foreign policy and defense without external pressures or alliance obligations.” [3]

In the current context of 2026, this autonomy must be distinguished from the defensive isolationism or the moralistic neutrality of the early Cold War era. Today, India's approach is characterized by active positioning. It is an era of "India First," where engagement is not seen as a compromise of sovereignty, but as a tool to enhance it. India's chairmanship of BRICS and its hosting of the AI Impact Summit are not merely ceremonial roles; they represent a calculated ambition to shape the governance structures of the future rather than merely responding to the rules set by others. India seeks to be a "rule-maker," not just a "rule-taker."

#### The Transition from Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

To understand India's current posture, one must trace the evolution from Non-Alignment (NAM) to the contemporary practice of multi-alignment.

Non-Alignment was born in a bipolar world where India sought to avoid being caught in the crossfire of the US-Soviet rivalry. It was often a policy of "equidistance" and, at times, withdrawal. However, in 2026, the logic of "distancing" has been replaced by the logic of "simultaneous engagement." Multi-alignment is the art of managing contradictory partnerships. It allows India to be a member of the Quad (with the US, Japan, and Australia) while simultaneously playing a leading role in the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and BRICS.

This shift reflects a realization that in a fragmented world, security is found in a diverse "portfolio" of relationships. By refusing to join a formal military alliance, India maintains the flexibility to pivot according to its national interest, leveraging its partnerships to gain technology, investment, and security guarantees without surrendering its veto power over its own foreign policy.

In 2026, this autonomy is not defensive isolationism. It is active positioning. India's chairmanship of BRICS and its hosting of the AI Impact Summit demonstrate its ambition to shape governance structures rather than merely respond to them.

#### Core Arguments of the Paper

This paper seeks to Analyze the architecture of this modern strategic autonomy by advancing three central arguments:

**The Evolution of Engagement:** It argues that India's doctrine has fundamentally evolved from a reactive stance of non-alignment to a proactive strategy of multi-alignment, which prioritizes functional partnerships over ideological blocs.

**The Operational Trilemma:** It asserts that the US-Russia-China trilemma creates the specific "red lines" and operational boundaries within which India must navigate to maintain its autonomy.

**The DPI Leverage:** It contends that Digital Public Infrastructure and a renewed focus on Global South leadership provide India with a unique form of "non-traditional leverage," allowing it to exert influence in the global governance of technology and economics.

Through these lenses, we can see that strategic autonomy in 2026 is not about standing alone; it is about standing at the center of a complex web of global interdependencies, ensuring that no single thread can pull India off its chosen path.

## **2. NEED OF THE STUDY-**

The current research is driven by the urgent requirement to understand how emerging powers maintain sovereign agency within an international system that has moved beyond a single center of gravity to one defined by profound geopolitical contestation and technological decoupling. This study is essential for the following reasons:

**Mapping the Operational Trilemma:** As the cooperative frameworks of the late 20th century are hollowed out by zero-sum logic, there is a critical need to analyze how a state can navigate the contradictory and unavoidable pressures exerted by the United States, Russia, and China. This research provides an essential roadmap for managing these "red lines" without succumbing to the status of a "client state".

**Deciphering Technological Sovereignty:** Great-power rivalry has shifted from traditional territorial disputes to the "invisible architectures" of semiconductor supply chains and artificial intelligence standards. This study is necessary to examine how initiatives like the TRUST Framework and iCET allow for "de-risking" while preventing "technological lock-in" by global partners.

**Evaluating Non-Traditional Soft Power:** The investigation is required to assess the impact of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) as a tool for structural influence. Understanding the exportation of the "India Stack" is vital, as it offers a non-Western developmental alternative that bridges the divide between global governance and the needs of the Global South.

**Assessing Systemic Frictions and Risks:** This research is compelled by the need to identify "systemic frictions"—such as regional "regime volatility" following the 2024 collapse of the Hasina government in Bangladesh and macroeconomic crises like the Rupee-Rouble liquidity trap. Evaluating these risks is fundamental to ensuring the resilience of a foreign policy architecture tied to the domestic goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

By integrating structural realism with hedging theory and neoclassical realism, this investigation fulfills a vital academic and policy-oriented requirement to conceptualize a proactive strategy of multi-alignment that ensures independent decision-making in a world where certainties are few.

### **3. DATA AND SOURCES OF DATA-**

This research utilizes a qualitative and secondary data-driven approach, gathering information from a variety of authoritative and contemporary sources to construct a comprehensive analysis of the 2026 geopolitical landscape. The data collection strategy is bifurcated into two primary categories: Institutional Primary-Source Documentation and Secondary Scholarly Analysis.

#### **1. Institutional and Governmental Documentation**

To ensure the highest level of empirical accuracy regarding state intent and diplomatic positioning, the study draws heavily from official government communications:

**Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Reports:** The study incorporates data from the 2024-25 Annual Reports and official communications from the Government of India to define the operational parameters of "Strategic Autonomy".

**Diplomatic Framework Agreements:** Specific data points regarding technological cooperation are sourced from the iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology) and the TRUST Framework (Technology-led Resilience and US-India Strategic Trust) documentation.

**Multilateral Institutional Data:** Information regarding India's participation in the QUAD, BRICS+, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is derived from joint statements and summit declarations issued through 2025.

#### **2. Economic and Trade Data**

The analysis of the "Rupee-Rouble" crisis and energy interdependence is supported by quantitative trade figures:

**Energy Import Statistics:** Data concerning crude oil imports and seaborne trade volumes are sourced from monthly policy reviews and trade audits, identifying Russia as the supplier of approximately 40% of India's crude requirements by early 2026.

**Trade Policy Assessments:** Information regarding the "Trump 2.0" tariff era and reciprocal trade measures is gathered from reports by Chatham House and Vision IAS, providing a macroeconomic context for India's export-led growth challenges.

#### **3. Scholarly and Think-Tank Research**

To provide theoretical depth and regional context, the study integrates findings from premier global research institutes:

**Security and Defense Analysis:** Data on maritime security, the "salami slicing" tactics on the Tibetan Plateau, and the RELOS (Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics) agreement are sourced from the Stimson Center and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

**Digital Infrastructure Studies:** The evaluation of the "India Stack" and the exportation of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) to over 160 countries is based on specialized reports from the Institut Montaigne and the International Centre for Defense and Security (ICDS).

**Regional Geopolitical Shifts:** Data concerning neighborhood volatility, including the post-Hasina transition in Bangladesh, is derived from the Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework Foundations**

The structural and conceptual data utilized for the analytical model (Layer 1: System, Layer 2: Strategy, Layer 3: Unit) are grounded in the seminal works of international relations theorists, including Kenneth Waltz (Structural Realism), Amitav Acharya (Multiplex World), and Kuik Cheng-Chwee (Hedging Theory).

### **3.1. Theoretical framework-**

To comprehensively evaluate India's strategic positioning in 2026, this study utilizes a multi-dimensional theoretical model. By synthesizing classical and contemporary International Relations (IR) theories, the research moves beyond a singular analytical lens to capture the complexity of a "multiplex world".

#### **3.1.1. Structural Realism: Managing Systemic Constraints**

At the systemic level, the study applies the principles of Structural Realism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz, to understand how the global distribution of power dictates state behavior.

**3.1.2. The Bipolarity-to-Multipolarity Shift:** In a system characterized by the diffusion of power and intense US-China rivalry, India's actions are viewed as a systemic adaptation to preserve maneuverability.

**Balance of Threat:** Following Stephen Walt's framework, the study argues that India aligns its policies not just against raw power, but against perceived threats, which explains its selective and functional cooperation with various global actors.

#### **3.1.3. Hedging Theory: The Art of Strategic Diversification**

The core of India's 2026 posture is analyzed through the lens of Hedging Theory, which describes a strategy of avoiding binary choices between competing powers.

**3.1.4. Sectoral Alignment:** Rather than pursuing formal alliances, India practices "sectoral alignment"—engaging the US for technological advancement while maintaining Russia as a hedge for energy and Eurasian stability.

**3.1.5. Risk Mitigation:** As defined by Kuik Cheng-Chwee, this approach seeks to maximize developmental benefits from multiple partners while minimizing the risks of "geopolitical entrapment" or abandonment by any single pole.

**3.1.6. Neoclassical Realism: Capacity-Driven Flexibility**

To account for internal variables, the study incorporates Neoclassical Realism, which bridges systemic pressures with domestic state capacity.

**3.1.7. Domestic-Systemic Interaction:** Following Gideon Rose's model, the research contends that India's expanding economic and technological prowess allows for a broader perception of strategic space among the foreign policy elite.

**3.1.8. Identity and Constructivism:** The framework also acknowledges India's self-perception as a "civilizational state" and a leader of the Global South, which acts as a cultural constraint against entering treaty-based military alliances.

**3.1.9. The Three-Layered Analytical Model**

To systematize the analysis, the paper proposes a hierarchical architecture that demonstrates how these theories interact to produce strategic autonomy:

Layer 1 (System Level): Examines multipolar diffusion and technological fragmentation using Structural Realism.

Layer 2 (State Strategy Level): Analyzes institutional diversification and sectoral alignment through Hedging Theory.

Layer 3 (Unit Level): Evaluates domestic economic growth and political legitimacy via Neoclassical Realism and Constructivism.

**Non-Alignment as Structural Response: A Realist Interpretation**

India's Non-Alignment during the Cold War can be interpreted through structural realism. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that the structure of the international system—defined by polarity—shapes state behavior. In a bipolar system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, secondary states faced high risks of entrapment and abandonment.

Waltz writes:

"The structure of a system acts as a constraint on state behaviour." [4]

For India, alliance participation would have constrained sovereign decision-making. Non-alignment was therefore a systemic adaptation—preserving maneuverability in a rigid bipolar order.

However, realism alone does not fully explain India's position. Stephen Walt's (1987) "balance of threat"[5] theory suggests states align not simply against power, but against perceived threat. India's threat perceptions varied over time—China in 1962, Pakistan intermittently, superpower pressure episodically. This explains India's selective tilt toward the Soviet Union in the 1970s without formal alliance commitment.

From a soft balancing perspective (Paul, 2005), non-alignment allowed India to use diplomatic coalitions (e.g., NAM, G77) to resist dominance without hard military alignment.

Thus, non-alignment was not moral abstention. It was structural realism moderated by postcolonial identity.

### **3.2 Multi-Alignment as Hedging Strategy**

The shift to multi-alignment in the 21st century corresponds with the transition from bipolarity to what Amitav Acharya (2014) calls a "multiplex world." Acharya argues:

"The emerging world order will not be dominated by a single power or group of powers." [6]

In such a fragmented system, rigid alliances become less functional. Instead, states pursue diversified engagement strategies. Evelyn Goh and Kuik Cheng-Chwee (2008) describe hedging as a strategy where states avoid both balancing and bandwagoning by cultivating multiple relationships to offset risk. Kuik defines hedging as:

"A strategy aimed at avoiding a choice between competing powers while seeking to maximize benefits and minimize risks." [7]

India's participation in QUAD (security), BRICS+ (financial reform), SCO (Eurasian stability), and iCET (technology partnership) fits this hedging model. Randall Schweller (1994) complicates traditional balancing theory by arguing that states do not always balance rising power; sometimes they "bandwagon for profit." India does neither purely. Instead, it practices sectoral alignment—cooperating with the US in technology, with Russia in energy, while competitively engaging China.

Thus, multi-alignment is best understood as structured hedging under multipolar uncertainty.

### **3.3 Principled Pragmatism: Neoclassical Realism and Identity**

Neoclassical realism bridges systemic pressures and domestic variables. Gideon Rose (1998) argues that foreign policy is shaped by:

"The relative distribution of power in the international system and domestic perceptions of that power." [8]

India's expanding economic capacity and technological ambition alter elite perceptions of strategic space. Rising material capabilities enable greater autonomy.

At the same time, constructivist insights illuminate the identity dimension. India's self-perception as a civilizational state and Global South leader shapes its reluctance to enter treaty alliances. Identity and historical memory constrain policy choices beyond material incentives.

"Robert Putnam's (1988) two-level game further reinforces that domestic politics and international negotiations interact structurally. Strategic autonomy resonates domestically as a sovereignty-preserving doctrine". [9]

Therefore, Principled Pragmatism is the synthesis:

- Structural realism explains external pressure.
- Hedging theory explains diversification.
- Neoclassical realism explains capacity-driven flexibility.
- Constructivism explains identity continuity.

India's 2026 doctrine is not ideological non-alignment 2.0. It is calibrated, theory-consistent adaptive statecraft.

Conceptual Model: The Architecture of Strategic Autonomy

This paper proposes a three-layered analytical framework synthesizing structural realism, hedging theory, and neoclassical realism to conceptualize India's strategic autonomy

To systematize this argument, India's 2026 foreign policy can be conceptualized as a three-layered architecture:

**Layer 1: Structural Environment (System Level)**

- Multipolar diffusion of power
- US–China rivalry
- Russia–West confrontation
- Technological fragmentation (Explained by Waltz, Acharya) [10]

↓

**Layer 2: Strategic Instruments (State Strategy Level)**

- Hedging (Kuik) [11]
- Sectoral alignment
- Institutional diversification
- Soft balancing

↓

**Layer 3: Domestic Foundations (Unit Level)**

- Economic growth
- Technological modernization
- Political legitimacy
- Identity as Global South leader

(Explained by Rose, Putnam) [12]

↓

**Outcome: Strategic Autonomy as Managed Trilemma**

The interaction of these layers produces a policy outcome:

- Alignment without alliance
- Competition without rupture
- Engagement without dependency

This model explains how India navigates the US–Russia–China trilemma structurally rather than tactically.

#### 4. **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY-**

This study employs a qualitative, analytical research design aimed at deciphering the complex multi-layered variables of India's 2026 foreign policy. Given the "perpetual flux" of the current international order, the methodology focuses on a "strategic foresight" approach, utilizing theoretical triangulation to interpret contemporary diplomatic and economic data.

##### 4.1 **Analytical Framework: The Three-Layered Model**

To provide a systemic evaluation, the research utilizes a hierarchical three-layered model that bridges macro-level global shifts with micro-level domestic drivers:

Layer 1: Structural Analysis (System Level): This layer examines the impact of the US-China rivalry and the diffusion of global power. It utilizes structural realism to analyze how systemic pressures—such as technological fragmentation—constrain state behavior.

Layer 2: Strategic Instrument Analysis (State Level): This level focuses on the operationalization of "Hedging" and "Sectoral Alignment". It evaluates how India utilizes institutional diversification (e.g., participation in both QUAD and BRICS+) to offset geopolitical risks.

Layer 3: Unit-Level Analysis (Domestic Level): The final layer assesses the domestic foundations of foreign policy, including economic growth trajectories and the role of "Identity" as a Global South leader.

##### 4.2 **Research Approach and Process**

The research follows a descriptive and exploratory process to map the "Architecture of Strategic Autonomy":

Literature Review: A comprehensive review of seminal International Relations theories—including the works of Waltz (1979), Acharya (2014), and Kuik (2008)—was conducted to establish a theoretical baseline.

Case Study Selection: The study selects three critical "trilemma" variables—the United States, Russia, and China—to test the resilience of India's issue-based alignment.

Thematic Synthesis: Data from the iCET, the Rupee-Rouble trade audits, and the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) exports are synthesized to identify recurring patterns of sovereign agency.

#### 4.3 Data Evaluation Techniques

The study applies "Process Tracing" to observe how specific events, such as the 2025 "Trump Shock" tariffs or the 2024-25 disengagements at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), influenced the evolution of India's strategic posturing. By analyzing the interaction between these variables, the methodology identifies the "red lines" and operational boundaries of modern strategic autonomy.

#### 4.4 Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

A primary assumption of this methodology is that state behavior in 2026 is driven by "Principled Pragmatism"—a synthesis of material capacity and civilizational identity. The study acknowledges the limitation that unforeseen "Black Swan" events or sudden shifts in domestic political legitimacy could alter the projected outcomes of this architecture.

### 5. THE GREAT POWER TRILEMMA

India's primary challenge in 2026 is maintaining an equilibrium between three conflicting powers.

#### 5.1 The United States: The Tech-Security Nexus

The Indo-US relationship is now anchored by the iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology).

The Cooperation: Joint ventures in semiconductor manufacturing and the Artemis Accords for space exploration.

The TRUST Initiative: Building on the 2023 iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging

Technology), the two nations launched the TRUST Framework (Technology-led Resilience and US-India Strategic Trust) in 2025.

This focuses on "de-risking" supply chains in semiconductors and AI."

The Friction: Managing the "Trump 2.0" era tariffs and US pressure to distance from Moscow.

The Trump 2.0 Dynamic: "India has had to navigate the "Trump Shock" of late 2025, which included a 50% reciprocal tariff on certain Indian exports as a response to India's continued purchase of Russian crude".

Status: A "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership" that remains the bedrock of India's modernization.

The Security Pillar: Despite trade friction, the QUAD remains the primary vehicle for maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, countering China's naval assertiveness.

#### 5.2 Russia: The Energy and Legacy Pillar

India's "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" with Moscow has transformed into an energy-and-investment bond to bypass Western sanctions.

The Rupee-Rouble Surplus: "By June 2025, India emerged as the recipient of 80% of Russia's seaborne crude oil. This created a "liquidity crisis" where Russia held billions in Indian Rupees; in response, the RBI facilitated a shift from "trade-for-cash" to "trade for-investment" in Indian infrastructure".

Energy Security: In 2025–26, Russia remains India's largest supplier of crude oil (~40% of imports).

Defense Continuity: "While diversifying toward France and the US, India still operationalized the RELOS (Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics) agreement with Russia in early 2025 to maintain its legacy platforms like the T-90 tanks and S-400 systems".

Strategic Hedge: India views Russia as a vital partner in ensuring a multipolar Eurasia and preventing a total Russia-China "no-limits" alliance. India's refusal to condemn Russia at the UN remains a core tenet of its autonomy, ensuring Moscow does not become a total client state of Beijing.

#### 5.3 China: The "Cold Peace" and Border Diplomacy

Relations with Beijing in 2026 are defined by tactical de-escalation without a return to the status quo ante.

LAC De-escalation: "Following the 2024–25 Depsang and Demchok disengagement, both nations have resumed limited patrolling. However, China's "salami slicing" tactics on the Tibetan Plateau and its infrastructure build-up remain a primary security threat".

The "Partners, Not Rivals" Rhetoric: "High-level meetings in 2025 saw a revival of dormant dialogues, with both sides adopting a "constructive" tone to prevent accidental conflict while their respective economies undergo structural shifts".

Economic Containment: India continues to restrict Chinese FDI and tech (e.g., TikTok and 5G bans) while positioning itself as a "democratic alternative" for global manufacturing.

#### 5.4 Digital Diplomacy and the Global South

India's most significant soft power tool in 2026 is its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

The India Stack: "India has successfully exported its UPI and Aadhaar models to over 160 countries, particularly across Africa and Southeast Asia, offering a non-Western, non-Chinese path to digitalization".

Neighborhood Volatility: "India faces renewed challenges in its backyard, including the 2024 fall of the Hasina government in Bangladesh and "Operation Sindoor" tensions with Pakistan in May 2025".

Viksit Bharat 2047: The foreign policy of 2026 is increasingly tied to the domestic goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047, requiring stable energy prices and open sea lanes.

While the "Architecture of Strategic Autonomy" provides India with a robust shield in a tripolar world, it is not an invulnerable structure. In the 2026 landscape, the doctrine of issue-based alignment faces four "systemic frictions": Geopolitical Entrapment, Regional Hegemonic Encroachment, Geoeconomic Weaponization, and the Domestic External Feedback Loop.

### 5.5 The Paradox of Geopolitical Entrapment: The 'Swing State' Dilemma

The primary structural risk is the Entrapment-Abandonment Paradox. As India deepens its "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership" with the United States—particularly through the iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology) and the 2026 maritime security pacts—it faces the risk of "de facto alignment."

**The Technology Sovereignty Trap:** By integrating the "India Stack" with Western semiconductor supply chains and AI safety protocols, India risks a "technological lock-in." If the US-China "Silicon Curtain" hardens further in late 2026, India may find its autonomous decision-making curtailed by the technical standards of its partners.

**The Russia-China Nexus:** A significant risk involves the "Junior Partner" status of Moscow. As Russia becomes more economically dependent on Beijing for dual-use technology, India's "Russian Hedge" becomes vulnerable. The risk is that China could exert a "secretariat veto" over Russian defense supplies to India (such as S-400 components), effectively neutralizing India's primary strategic deterrent via Moscow.

### 5.6 The 'Neighborhood First' Fragility: The Ring of Fire

Strategic autonomy at the global level is often undermined by tactical instability at the regional level. India's 2026 periphery is characterized by what scholars call "Regime Volatility."

**The Post-2024 Bangladesh Transition:** The collapse of the stable Awami League era in 2024 has led to a 2026 environment where India must navigate a more fragmented political landscape in Dhaka. The risk is the "institutionalization of anti-India sentiment," which provides a gateway for Chinese infrastructure investments that carry "dual-use" military potential in the Bay of Bengal.

**The Himalayan Salami Slicing:** China's "Gray Zone" tactics along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) create a "Strategic Exhaustion" risk. By maintaining a high-intensity standoff without engaging in a full-scale kinetic war, Beijing forces India to divert its "Viksit Bharat" developmental capital into permanent high-altitude military deployments, slowing India's economic ascent.

### 5.7 Geoeconomic Weaponization: The 'Fortress' Challenge

In 2026, the global trade order has shifted from "Rules-Based" to "Power-Based." India faces the risk of being caught in the crossfire of "Weaponized Interdependence."

**The Protectionist Squeeze:** With the rise of "Trump 2.0" transnationalism and the EU's "Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism" (CBAM), India's export-led growth is under threat. The risk is a "Reciprocity Trap"—where Western allies demand market access in India's sensitive agricultural or retail sectors in exchange for continued security cooperation.

**The Rupee-Rouble Liquidity Crisis:** As detailed in the 2025-26 trade audits, the accumulation of non-convertible Rupees in Russian accounts poses a macroeconomic risk. If India cannot find productive ways to reinvest these funds into domestic infrastructure, it risks creating a "dead-capital" bubble that could destabilize the Rupee's internationalization.

### 5.8 The Internal-External Link: The Fragility of 'Brand India'

Neoclassical realism suggests that a state's foreign policy is only as strong as its domestic cohesion.

**The Pluralism Variable:** India's primary lever in the Global South is its identity as a "Democratic Alternative" to the Chinese model. Any perception of internal social fragmentation, communal friction, or democratic backsliding in 2026 serves as a "soft power tax." These risks alienating partners in the ASEAN and the African Union, who view India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) not just as technology, but as a byproduct of a stable, inclusive democracy.

## 6. CONCLUSION-

India's 2026 foreign policy is neither neutral nor indifferent; it is actively independent. By leveraging its market size, technological prowess, and historical ties, India has carved out a unique space where it acts as a "pole" in a multipolar world. The "trilemma" of US, Russia, and China is managed not by choosing sides, but by choosing issues.

The "Architecture of Strategic Autonomy" as practiced by India in 2026 represents more than a transitional foreign policy; it is a seminal shift in the behavior of middle to-great powers in a post-hegemonic world. This study has demonstrated that India's refusal to succumb to the binary pressures of the US-China rivalry is not an act of "fence-sitting," but a sophisticated exercise in sovereign agency.

### 6.1 Synthesis: Managing the Trilemma

The preceding analysis of the US-Russia-China trilemma reveals that India has successfully decoupled its strategic needs. By treating the United States as a technology and security partner, Russia as a stabilizing energy and defense legacy anchor, and China as a managed systemic rival, New Delhi has effectively neutralized the "zero-sum" logic that characterized 20th-century diplomacy.

The 2026 framework proves that a state can simultaneously participate in the QUAD (security) and BRICS+ (economic multipolarity) without structural collapse. This "issue-based alignment" is the new currency of international relations. It allows India to leverage its "market size" and "digital public infrastructure" (DPI) to command a seat at the table where global rules are written, rather than merely following them.

### 6.2 Theoretical Contribution: Beyond Neorealism

From a theoretical perspective, India's 2026 posture challenges the traditional Neorealist assumption that rising powers must eventually "bandwagon" with a hegemon or lead a "balancing" coalition. Instead, India is pioneering "Strategic Hedging 2.0." This model suggests that in a world of "weaponized interdependence," the most powerful asset a state can possess is Optionality. By maintaining high levels of interoperability with Western systems (iCET) while ensuring energy security through non-Western channels (the Rupee-Rouble mechanism), India creates a "buffer of autonomy." These findings suggest that the future of the

international system may not be bipolar or even truly multipolar, but multi-nodal, with India acting as a critical node connecting disparate geopolitical circuits.

### 6.3 Final Reflections: The Path to 2047

As India moves toward its "Viksit Bharat 2047" objective, the challenges identified—ranging from the "Neighborhood First" volatility to the "Trump 2.0" trade shocks—will test the resilience of this architecture. The internal-external link remains the most vital pillar; India's global "brand" as a democratic, pluralistic power is the "soft power" fuel that makes its "hard power" maneuvers acceptable to the Global South.

In conclusion, the foreign policy of 2026 is an assertive declaration of India as an independent pole. It is a policy designed for a world where certainties are few, but opportunities for those who can navigate complexity are vast. India is no longer a "swing state" waiting for the pendulum of history to move; it has become the anchor around which the pendulum must now swing.

### REFERENCES

- [1] News.Az. (2025). The return of great-power competition is reshaping global politics. <https://news.az/news/the-return-of-great-power-competition-is-reshaping-global-politics>
- [2] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2023). India's strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. <https://www.mea.gov.in>
- [3] Ministry of External Affairs. (2025). Annual report 2024-25: India's role in a changing global order. Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual\\_Report\\_2024-25](https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual_Report_2024-25)
- [4] Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of international politics. McGraw-Hill.
- [5] Walt, S. M. (1987). The origins of alliances. Cornell University Press.
- [6] Acharya, A. (2014). The end of American world order. Polity Press.
- [7] Kuik, C. C. (2008). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), 159–185.
- [8] Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172.
- [9] Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427–460.
- [10] Acharya, A. (2014). The end of American world order. Polity Press.
- [11] Kuik, C.-C. (2008). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), 159–185. <https://doi.org/10.1355/CS30-2A>
- [12] Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427–460.

### Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.