

REVIEW ARTICLE

India's Strategic Autonomy: A Proactive Strategy in the Polarized World Order

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Arunoday Bajpai. India's Strategic Autonomy: A Proactive Strategy in the Polarized World Order. Int J Pol Sci 2025; 11(1): 17-24.

ABSTRACT

The principle of Strategic Autonomy is the cardinal principle of India's post cold war foreign policy. It refers to independence of foreign policy with respect to strategic issues and interests of a nation. India's strategic autonomy has roots in her erstwhile policy of non-alignment. In the post-cold war global order, it originated in context of India's close strategic ties with the US as India still continues to enjoy strategic ties with US rival Russia. The practice of strategic autonomy in India reveals that it largely used to vindicate India policy from the undue influence of the US. However, the positive and proactive dimensions of Strategic Autonomy involves India's greater role in increasingly polarized global order. It suits the needs of an emerging power like India.

KEYWORDS

• Proactive Strategic Autonomy • Non-alignment • Independence of foreign policy • Polarized world order • Strategic Partnership

Key Message: (If available) India's strategic autonomy needs proactive orientations.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic autonomy is one of the main policy tools of India's foreign policy in the post-cold war era. India has successfully practiced this principle to maintain balanced relations with major powers mainly the US and Russia. However, the present conflicts like Ukraine,

Gaza, tension in South China Sea and other areas have led to greater polarization among powers of the world. In this environment of polarization, India's balancing act has become difficult. But it also offers a new opportunity for India to launch a proactive phase of strategic autonomy by engaging with major powers for

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➤ Received: 08-02-2025 ➤ Accepted: 21-03-2025



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the resolution of these conflict and reduction of strategic polarization. India's policy of multi-alignment under the strategic autonomy needs to be activated. It will not only lead to a more peaceful and stable global order but also help India is assuming larger role in contemporary global affairs.

The end of cold war did not hold its promise, neither did globalization. Francis Fukuyama's '*End of History*'¹ thesis was supplanted soon by Huntington's '*Clash of Civilizations*'² thesis. Huntington's thesis may explain a number of ongoing post-cold war conflicts in different parts of the world like conflict and confrontation in Gaza, Yemen or many African countries like Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan and Congo, but it fails to capture the essence of many other conflicts like Ukraine war or tensions in South China Sea, Indo-China rivalry, or trade war launched by the America under the leadership of new leader Trump. The present global conflicts are not merely for protecting ethnic survival and dominance, but they are also for protecting national interests and for maintaining as well as gaining global/regional hegemony. For example the Ukraine war is the result of clash between Russia's resurgence and its desire to regain its cold war era influence on the one hand and America's desire to further consolidate its hold in Europe through NATO in the Eastern Europe. Mearsheimer's '*Offensive Realism*'³ is a better guide to Ukraine conflict; which argues that nations increase their hegemony and influence to advance their national interest in anarchic world. Xi Jinping's '*China Dream*'⁴ to attain the global power status by 2049 at completion of 100 years of Communist revolution is still clicking. China's path to global power status goes through her regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. Trump's '*Make America Great Again*'⁵ (MAGA) and '*America First*'⁵ ideas are nothing but to gain inner capabilities to maintain its global hegemony by other means (trade protectionism and Immigrants issue) amidst its shrinking global role and responsibilities. The above examples of Russia (Ukraine war), China and the US- the three leading global players- demonstrate that the global conflicts are very complex and not amenable to explanation by a single analytical tool. Irrespective of the specific and general causes of these tensions and conflict, one sure outcome is the increasing strategic polarization among major global players across different contemporary global issues, challenges and

arenas.

Where India stands in this polarization characterized by strategic churns and shifts? India's domestic goal of *Viksit Bharat @47*⁶ is well articulated, but its external ramifications are not well pronounced. However, unlike its counterparts like China Dream, America First or Russian resurgence, the idea of *Viksit Bharat* is non-confrontational and more addressed to domestic audience than to external audience. Thus, its external implications may be unraveled in terms of India's projected national resources, the prevailing international environment and the foreign policy tools available to navigate the emerging domestic and external environment. This article is concerned with the third element-available foreign policy tools and their ramifications for India's future role and status in the emerging global order. Among many policy elements, the feature of India's **Strategic Autonomy** is well pronounced in contemporary foreign policy of India. The policy of 'Strategic Autonomy' is not only the defining feature of India's response to prevailing global order, but it also has potential to become an stabilizing and balancing force in the contemporary global order.

What is Strategic Autonomy?

Strategic Autonomy is a distinct feature of India's foreign policy in post-cold war era. Strategic autonomy refers to a foreign policy posture where a nation is capable of adopting an independent stand without any external influence on core issues of its national interests. Thus, the essence of the principle of the strategic autonomy is independence of foreign policy on strategic and core issues of a nation. According to IDSA expert S. Kalyanaraman (2015), 'Strategic autonomy denotes the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without being constrained in any manner by other states. In its pure form, strategic autonomy presupposes the state in question possessing overwhelmingly superior power. This is what would enable that state to resist the pressures that may be exerted by other states to compel it to change its policy or moderate its interests'. In brief, the independence of foreign policy is the basic element of strategic autonomy.

The need of independence arises when a nation is confronted with such external

influences and pressure, which undermine its own interests. The posture of independence essentially involves avoiding the dependence on any external power on the strategic matters of foreign policy. It is in this sense that a noted scholar Rajiv Sikri (2009) argues that the strategic autonomy can be described as a dependence control strategy aimed at safeguarding its independence in both foreign policy decision making and protecting strategic assets. For India strategic autonomy necessitates the association between an autonomous foreign policy/security decision making capability and the preservation of material assets (both technical and economic). It is in this sense that he argues that the notion of strategic autonomy can only be a relative principle as absolute independence is not possible in foreign affairs. Thus, a nation is strategically autonomous to the extent it is not dependent on external powers for its strategic decisions.

The idea of strategic autonomy has been debated in European Union also, mainly since 2013 in the context of European Union's policy choices constrained by the completion and rivalry between the US and China. The European Union has strong trade and economic relations with both. It was in that context that EU leaders adopted the principle of strategic autonomy to ensure the independence of its policy choices. A think tank of European Parliament (2022) describes EU strategic autonomy as 'the capacity of the EU to act autonomously that is, without being dependent on other countries in strategically important policy areas. These can range from defence policy to the economy, and the capacity to uphold democratic values. Later EU propagated a modified version of strategic autonomy named as '*Open Strategic autonomy*' which aims to *enhance Europe's self-sufficiency and independence in critical areas* while staying open to global trade and economic partnership. However, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) of European Parliament caution that the term strategic autonomy should not be understood as a reference to autarchy, protectionism, or unilateralism. Neither is it confined to defence and security policy or building resilience or self-reliance. Instead, it should be understood as a means to promote EU interests and values. On its end, the European Commission defines 'open strategic autonomy' as 'the EU's ability

to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its strategic interests and values' (EESC: 2024).

Nature of Strategic Autonomy

As a concept of foreign policy as well as its practice by India and the EU, the idea of strategic autonomy displays the following characteristics:

1. The Strategic autonomy presupposes external constraints to nation's foreign policy choices and its desire to seek independence from such constraints. Independence of foreign policy is the essence of strategic autonomy.
2. The Strategic Autonomy is a relative position between dependence and to total independence. The complete independence in foreign affairs is not possible in the present global environment.
3. Strategic autonomy is not just a defensive strategy to avoid or reduce external dependence in foreign policy, but it is also proactive concept, which seeks to reshape the external environment as per the vision of its upholder. India's present policy of multi-alignment is the proactive dimension of strategic autonomy.
4. The strategic autonomy is closely related with the nation's national power and the prevailing external environment. More a nation has national power and favourable external environment. According to Vinod Kumar (2015), the practice of strategic autonomy is a function of the power capabilities possessed by a state and of the structure of the international system in a particular historical arena. He further argues that the ability of regional powers like India to resist external pressure and practice strategic autonomy on non-core security issues is likely to be a function of the structure of the international order. A bipolar or a multi-polar order is likely to provide greater diplomatic room for manoeuvre and thus help avoid the high costs of pursuing a policy or interest. But a uni-polar order is likely to restrict the diplomatic elbow room available and thus the ability to avoid the costs associated

with pursuing a particular policy.

5. While majority of the scholars treat strategic autonomy as a foreign policy tool or posture to realize the goals of national interests, the element of independence of foreign policy as essence of strategic autonomy makes it also a goal of foreign policy. After all, the independence of foreign policy is one of the basic objectives of foreign policy. This is valid in case of post-cold war strategic autonomy as it was true in case of cold war policy of Non-alignment. Thus, the principle of strategic autonomy is both the end as well as the means of foreign policy at the same time. This unique nature of strategic autonomy has subjected it to multiple interpretations. While maximalists would treat it as a goal and slight dilution in strategic autonomy would be treated as undermining of the independence of foreign policy, the pragmatists would view it as a tool of foreign policy to realize the national interest and hence it is subject to variations as per the need of national interests. For example, India's policy of non-alignment was subjected to this kind of debate in 1971 when India signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with USSR (now Russia) to address the threat posed by the US military support to Pakistan during the 1971 war. Similarly, the signing of India-US Nuclear deal in 2008 led to debate on India's strategic autonomy between pragmatists and maximalists. The essence of these debates is the point that the strategic autonomy (in the sense of independence of foreign policy) is viewed both as a goal as well as a tool of foreign policy.

The Roots of India's Principle of Strategic Autonomy

The idea and practice of strategic autonomy in the present form is the post cold war characteristics of India's foreign policy. At the time of end of cold war in 1990s, India was faced with the a new international environment characterized by disintegration of Soviet Union, emergence of unipolar world order led by the US, and the process of increasing globalization riding on the ideology of neo-liberalism, again led by the western world. In this drastically changed environment, Indian foreign policy became more pragmatic (free

from ideological hangover of cold war politics) and multi-aligned (in place of non-alignment of cold war era). These changes were subsumed under the principle of strategic autonomy. In this sense, strategic autonomy appears to be new principle of Indian foreign policy in the post-cold war era.

However, if we analyze the essence of strategic autonomy through the idea of independence of foreign policy, it is not a new principle but has roots in India's cold war policy of non-alignments. The noted scholars of Indian foreign policy, Appadorai and Rajan (1988), after quoting Constituent Assembly debates on this issues and Nehru's various statements (issued during 1947 to 1960), have identified three basic elements of India's policy of Non-Alignment: *not entering into any military alliance with any country; an independent approach to foreign policy or acting according to our best judgment; and maintaining friendly relations with all countries*. All three elements are relevant to India's present policy of 'strategic autonomy'. India is still adhering to these principles in her foreign policy practice in the changed international environment. For example, India is still opposed to entering into any military alliance with any country including with her close strategic partner, the US. India has shied away to convert QUAD group into military alliance and rebuffed China's criticism of describing QUAD as Asian NATO. Second, the principle of independence of foreign policy is common to both Non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Third, India's practice of multi-alignment is nothing but reformulation of her policy of maintaining friendly relations with all countries. While emphasizing the element of independence in India's policy of non-alignment, Nehru claimed in Lok Sabha debate on 9 December, 1958, 'this policy (non-alignment) is inherent in the circumstances of India, inherent in the past thinking of India, inherent in whole mental outlook of India' inherent in the conditioning of Indian mind during our national struggle for freedom and inherent in the circumstances of the case today' (Quoted in Appadorai and Rajan: 1988). Thus, independence of foreign policy is the reflection of India's mental outlook shaped through the ages of history. In contemporary world India foreign policy is equally faced with constraints from the major global powers as it steers its independent course.

In the present context of increasing global polarization among the major powers, the noted scholar, C. Raja Mohan (2022) traces roots of India's strategic autonomy in her policy of Non-alignment in cold war days. He concludes that India's policy of strategic autonomy is, at present, constrained by India's dependence on Russia for defence supply. This is in reference to India's refusal to criticize Russia for Ukraine war, even if it was not acceptable to India in view of her principled stand on sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations. In addition, India is a civilization country with fifth largest economy, and largest functioning democracy. The independence of foreign policy is not just generic to Indian psyche; it is also the necessity for a rising country, which aspires to achieve a respectable place among the comity of nations. Yet the policy of strategic autonomy is not just a replica of former policy of non-alignment. In changed circumstances, its tone and tenor has assumed new dimensions. Unlike the erstwhile policy of Non-alignment, the strategic autonomy is characterized by greater pragmatism, multi-alignment and enhanced capability to pursue its goals. In view of these facts, another scholar, Monsonis (2010) argued that the concept of strategic autonomy, which is a realist mutation of the traditional non-aligned posture, can be described as a set of strategies aiming to balance independence in both foreign policy and security decision-making processes.

Contemporary Global Polarization and Practice of India's Strategic Autonomy

The practice of strategic autonomy goes back to the early years of post-cold war environment, which was characterized by the unipolar world dominated by the US and her European allies. In these circumstances, India adopted a policy of developing close strategic ties with the United States. The principle came into limelight during the debate on signing of Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008 under the Manmohan Sign government. The Indian government faced stringent criticism from her communist allies on the issue of undermining India's independence by signing this deal. After withdrawal of support by the communist parties, Manmohan Singh even faced the no-confidence motion on this issue. While speaking in the Lok Sabha on 21 August, 2006, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assured the nation,

'There is no question that we will ever compromise, in any manner, our independent foreign policy. We shall retain our strategic autonomy' (Quoted in Monsonis: 2010).

Over the years India developed close defence and strategic ties with the US and share a common strategic perspective on the Indo-Pacific. Some of examples of their close strategic partnership are: Signing of defence cooperation agreements in 2005 and 2015, signing of four foundational defence agreements to enhance operationality between the defence forces of the two countries, joint military exercises and common strategic perspective on Indo-Pacific as members of Quad and so on. Thus, the strategic partnership with the US was viewed as a challenge for India's policy of strategic autonomy, but India stood her ground as the later events unfold.

Over the years, India's interests have diversified with her rising economic and political status in the global affairs. India has close ties with US, but it also has the need for the close ties with its opponents like the Iran and Russia. India has to take care of her diversified interest as a rising nation. India signed Chabahar agreement with Iran in 2016 when the US imposed sanctions against Iran. India has to adopt a balancing attitude in the ongoing Gaza conflict (2023) in order to protect her interests. Iran and Israel have tense relations, but India has close ties with both countries.

Case of Ukraine War and Russia: India's relations with Russia have always been under scanner during the post-cold war era. India has close defence, energy and technical cooperation with Russia since the days of cold war era. India's reliance on Russia for her defence supply is hall mark of this relationship. In spite of Indian efforts towards the diversification of her defence imports, Russia still counts for 49 percent of India's defence imports. Also, India finds Russia as a trusted strategic ally. In fact, there is an argument that if India needs the US for her interests in the Indo-Pacific region, she needs Russia to protect her interests in the northern region. The US and her European allies have been imposing various sanctions against Russia since Crimea War in 2014, when Russia captured Crimea (Ukrainian territory located in Black Sea) in swift military action. However, in spite of US opposition, India purchased S-400 missile system from Russia in

2018, as India considers this deal essential for security on the western and northern border.

In fact, the Ukraine war presents a harder test to India's policy of strategic autonomy. Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 has pitched Russia and US on the opposite sides. After this event, the US and European Union have imposed stringent sanctions against Russia. It has led to greater polarization between the US and her allies on the one hand and Russia on the other. But India's following the principle of strategic autonomy has not cared for these restrictions. The US and her European allies have exerted diplomatic pressure on India in 2023 so that India declares Russia as an aggressor against Ukraine in the various UN resolutions passed against Russia. However, India has not voted in favour of any such resolution, which is critical of Russian military actions in Ukraine. India has supported just one resolution on Ukraine war in 2022, which called for investigation of Bucha Massacre allegedly committed by Russian forces in 2022. Not only that, defying the US sanctions, India has purchased cheap oil from Russia in 2023 in so much so that Russia emerged as the largest supplier of crude oil to India in 2023. Before the Russian-Ukraine war period, imports from Russia were less than one per cent of the total oil imports by India. Russian imports now form almost 40 per cent of India's total oil purchases (Alex: 2024).

Strategic Autonomy As A Proactive Strategy

The discussion on India's strategic autonomy is largely confined to treated is as a dependence avoiding posture of India's foreign policy. However, as explained earlier, Strategic autonomy is not just a defensive strategy, but a proactive approach to foreign policy. Such proactive approach is not possible is foreign policy is not independent. Even during the Ukraine war, India has adopted a principled stand by supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations including that of Ukraine. India has been highly critical of the war and such demanded its early resolution. Even India indirectly counseled Russia to desist from the war. For example in September, 2022, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in the city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Modi told Russian President Putin, *'I know that today's era is not of war and we have talked to you many times over the phone on the subject that democracy and diplomacy and dialogue*

are all these things that touch the world'. Putin responded by telling the Indian leader that he was aware of his concerns (Pratap: 2022). Modi repeated the phrase that this is not the time of war subsequently at the G-20 Summit at Bali, Indonesia and other global forums. Also while addressing the Parvasi Bhartiya Conference on 9 January, 2025; Modi further added that this is not a time of Yuddha (war) but time for Buddha (peace). These are India's subtle message to Russia to stop the aggression. But India cannot undermine her interest by toeing the line of US in this war.

Thus, India has stood as messenger of peace and balancing force in the conflict ridden and highly polarized world. Many countries praised India's principled stand on this war and expected India to play a mediating role in Ukraine war. Indian Prime Minister visited Russia on 8-10 July, 2024, which initially evoked critical response from US and Ukraine both. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was harsher on his criticism of Modi's hug with Putin. Zelenskyy had called PM Modi's visit to Moscow a "huge disappointment" and a "devastating blow" to peace efforts (Business Today: 2024). However, Modi also visited Ukraine on 23 August, 2024 and hugged Ukrainian President Zelenskyy in the manner he hugged Russian President Putin in July 2024 visit. This silenced western criticism of Indian stand on War and further strengthened India's position as mediator in this war. In this scenario of high polarization, India is one of the few countries which are in position to talk to both sides in this war. China has sided with Russia and the US and the entire western world including Japan, South Korea and Australia are openly critical to Russia and have trust deficit to mediate in this war.

India has not succeeded in resolving the Ukraine conflict due to highly polemic position of both sides in the war. The US and European countries have treated Russian action in Europe as a new threat to their security on the one hand, and Russia has treated NATO's expansion in the East Europe as well as NATO's military support to Ukraine as threat to her security. These positions are irreconcilable and not amenable to easy resolution. Yet, India's emergence as a balancing force, messenger of peace and mediator of global conflicts highlight the proactive dimensions of India's principle of strategic autonomy. It opens

new pathways for future role for India in the increasingly polarized world. By projecting India as peace maker, India asserts its claim for larger role in global affairs as well as permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. By showing that India is uniquely capable of playing trusted go-between and paving the way for a more substantive peace process between Moscow and Kyiv, Modi also makes the case that India cannot be sidelined from other matters of global consequence (Markey and Ruppert: 2024).

CONCLUSION

The basic idea behind the strategic autonomy is the 'independence of foreign policy' to protect core interests. Though, India's strategic autonomy has started as defensive doctrine initially to avoid dependence on any major power, however, it has the potential to evolve into a proactive concept and practice of India's foreign policy. India needs to pursue this proactive course of strategic autonomy to gradually shape the world as per her convictions and values. For this an emerging power like India should not only focus on enhancing her capabilities but also play a larger role as peace maker, a balancing force and a source of stability and prosperity in the world. India has charted a new course by espousing the cause of Global South and mainstreaming their concerns in global arena. For India to play larger role in global order, India needs proactive articulation of strategic autonomy. Thus, in the 21st century, given India's rising status and diversified interests, the principle of 'strategic autonomy' is not the choice of Indian foreign policy; rather it is the necessity for attaining the goals of her foreign policy.

Conflict of Intestate: No point of intestate conflict.

Funding: There is no funding from any source.

Ethics Declaration: There is no ethical issue involved in this Article.

NOTES

1. Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis postulates that the disintegration of socialist Soviet Union in 1991 is the final victory of western economic order based on the ideas of capitalism, free market and

neo-liberalism.

2. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' argues that the future war in post cold war era will be more on basis of ethnic and religious identity rather than for territory as happened in the traditional wars.
3. The notion of 'Offensive Realism', given by American scholar John Mearsheimer is a variant of Neo Realism theory in International Relations. Offensive realism postulates that nations acquire more power for global hegemony (not for self defence) in the archaic global order.
4. *China Dream* is the idea given by the present President Xi Jinping. It aims to make China as a major economic and military power by the year 2049, when China's communist revolution completes 100 years.
5. The idea of *America First* was given by American President during his previous term (2016-2020) to give priority to American interests in the global affairs in comparison to her global responsibility. The slogan of *Make America Great Again* (MAGA) was originally raised by Ronald Reagan in 1980s, and repeated by Trump during the 2024 Presidential elections. The idea of MAGA also gives primacy to America's economic and other interests.
6. *Vikasit Bharat* is campaign of the present NDA government led by PM Modi. The idea aims to make India a developed country by the year 2047 when India completes 100 years of her independence. The 25 year period to achieve this goal from 2025 onwards is known as *Amrit Kal*.

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