



E-ISSN: 2664-603X

P-ISSN: 2664-6021

Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92

IJPSG 2025; 7(9): 310-313

[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)

Received: 12-07-2025

Accepted: 09-08-2025

**Dr. Nitin Sudam Mohod**

Department of Political  
Science, SK Somaiya College of  
Arts, Science and Commerce,  
Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

## Navigating the New World: India's Foreign Policy and the decade of strategic assertion (2014-2024)

**Nitin Sudam Mohod**

**DOI:** <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i9d.695>

### Abstract

The decade from 2014 to 2024 marked a transformative period in India's engagement with the world, a definitive departure from the cautious, reactive posturing that often characterised the preceding eras. Under the sustained leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country's foreign policy architecture was fundamentally re-engineered, shifting from a tradition of non-alignment to a dynamic and proactive doctrine of multi-alignment. This article posits that this period was defined by the recalibration of "strategic autonomy" from a defensive principle of neutrality into a versatile and assertive tool for advancing concrete national interests. We deconstruct this evolution through three cores, interlocking pillars: the conscious projection of India as a civilisational state and leading power (*Vishwa Guru*); the pragmatic, interest-driven embrace of issue-based alliances across the geopolitical spectrum; and a relentless, if complex, focus on direct neighbourhood engagement under the "Neighbourhood First" policy. The analysis delves into key diplomatic initiatives, the intricate management of critical relationships with the United States, Russia, and China, and the response to epoch-defining global shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War. The article concludes that by 2024, India had successfully carved out a unique position as an indispensable, swing power in a fragmenting international order. However, this hard-won stature is perpetually challenged by the unresolved and intensifying rivalry with China, the inherent tensions in its multi-alignment strategy, and the mounting pressures of an increasingly bipolar world.

**Keywords:** National interest, assertive, diplomacy, alignment, multipolar, soft power

### Introduction

The decisive electoral victory of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi in 2014 resonated far beyond India's borders. It was more than a domestic political upheaval; it signalled the potential for a profound and ambitious shift in the nation's external orientation. The new government arrived with a powerful mandate for change, promising to unshackle the economy from bureaucratic inertia and, just as importantly, to restore India's perceived rightful place on the global stage. The preceding decade, under the United Progressive Alliance, had witnessed steady economic growth and engagement, but its foreign policy was often perceived as lacking a certain theatricality, a decisive thrust, and a unifying strategic narrative. The period from 2014 would be qualitatively different. It was characterised by a distinct personalisation of diplomacy, a conscious break from the ideological baggage of the past, and a clear-eyed, unsentimental pursuit of national interests framed within a narrative of resurgent civilisational confidence.

This paper contends that the overarching narrative of Indian foreign policy in this decade was the sophisticated operationalisation of a new, assertive, and entrepreneurial form of strategic autonomy. This was no longer the non-alignment of the Cold War, which, for all its merits, often veered into a form of non-commitment. Instead, it was reimagined as a proactive strategy of multi-alignment a deliberate and calculated effort to engage deeply with all power centres simultaneously to extract maximum diplomatic, economic, and strategic benefit while scrupulously avoiding entangling alliances that could compromise its freedom of action. This approach was not without its critics, both domestic and international, who pointed to its apparent contradictions and moral ambiguities. However, its execution, from the halls of the United Nations to the contested, high-altitude frontlines of the Himalayas, demonstrated a newfound agility, confidence, and occasionally, a necessary ruthlessness in Indian statecraft.

**Corresponding Author:**

**Dr. Nitin Sudam Mohod**

Department of Political  
Science, SK Somaiya College of  
Arts, Science and Commerce,  
Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

This article will trace the contours of this transformation, examining its doctrinal foundations, its practical application across different theatres, its trial by fire during global crises, and the persistent challenges that threaten its long-term sustainability.

### I. The Doctrinal Pillars of a New Assertiveness

The transformation in India's global posture was not a series of ad-hoc reactions but was built upon several interconnected doctrinal pillars that collectively distinguished the Modi era from its predecessors.

#### From Balancing to Leading

A central, and often underappreciated, theme was the conscious projection of India not merely as a balancing power or a swing state, but as a leading civilisational state destined to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The government actively fostered the idea of India as *Vishwa Guru* (world teacher), a concept drawn from its cultural nationalist worldview. This was not empty rhetoric; it was operationalised through a strategic leveraging of India's soft power assets. The orchestration of International Yoga Day, for instance, was a diplomatic coup that embedded Indian cultural practice within the UN system. Similarly, the global promotion of Ayurveda, alongside the country's democratic credentials, was used to craft a distinct brand identity a nation that offered an alternative to both the authoritarian capitalism of China and the perceived social fragmentation of the West. This ambition manifested in grand diplomatic spectacles designed for both domestic and international audiences. The "Howdy Modi" event in Houston in 2019, where the Indian leader shared a stage with a sitting US President, was a powerful demonstration of India's ability to mobilise its diaspora as a political and diplomatic asset. These events were meticulously choreographed to project an image of an ascendant India, confident in its identity and ready to claim its place as a norm-shaper rather than a norm-taker. This represented a significant psychological shift, moving away from a post-colonial mind-set of grievance to one of opportunity and leadership.

#### The Neighbourhood First Policy

A core tenet of the new foreign policy was the recognition that global stature is impossible without undisputed regional pre-eminence. The "Neighbourhood First" policy was thus launched with great fanfare, aiming to reset relationships that had often been fraught with neglect and mistrust. The initial outreach was marked by powerful symbolic gestures. Prime Minister Modi's decision to invite all SAARC leaders to his inauguration in 2014 was an unprecedented move, signalling a new chapter. His first bilateral visit to Bhutan, a small but strategically vital neighbour, reinforced the message that India would no longer take its backyard for granted.

However, this policy also revealed a harder, more realist edge as the decade progressed. The relationship with Nepal, for instance, oscillated dramatically. The 2015 economic blockade, perceived in Kathmandu as being tacitly supported by India in response to Nepal's new constitution, triggered a massive anti-India backlash and pushed Nepal closer to China. This was a stark lesson in the limitations of coercive diplomacy. Similarly, India's military interventions the 2015 operation to evacuate citizens and foreigners from Yemen and the swift deployment to the Maldives in 2021 to

counter a perceived pro-China coup plot demonstrated a newfound willingness to use hard power to protect its immediate national interests and counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region.

The most volatile relationship remained that with Pakistan. It witnessed dramatic, almost theatrical, shifts that reflected the new government's risk-tolerant approach. Prime Minister Modi's impromptu visit to Lahore in 2015 was a bold gamble for peace. Its failure, culminating in the terrorist attack on Pathankot, led to a definitive hardening of posture. The "surgical strikes" of 2016 and the Balakot airstrike of 2019 were not merely military actions; they were powerful political statements that fundamentally altered the established rules of engagement. They signalled a new threshold for retaliation against cross-border terrorism, moving away from strategic restraint to a doctrine of punitive pre-emption, a shift that was broadly supported by the domestic populace and cemented a new normal in Indo-Pak relations.

#### Multi-Alignment in Practice

The most sophisticated and defining element of this decade was India's adeptness at maintaining strong, simultaneous relationships with competing and often adversarial powers. This was not a passive policy of sitting on the fence, but an active, entrepreneurial endeavour to engage with all sides, leveraging its unique position as a large market, a democratic counterweight, and a strategic partner.

- **The Deepening Embrace of the United States:** The relationship with the United States underwent its most significant transformation. It evolved from a hesitant "strategic partnership" to a comprehensive global partnership. This was cemented by the signing of foundational defence agreements the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, COMCASA in 2018, and BECA in 2020. These pacts, which facilitate interoperability and secure communications, were once unthinkable and effectively cemented a quasi-alliance framework. The revival and elevation of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) to a leaders-level forum was arguably the most consequential strategic initiative of the decade for India. Framed around a shared vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific," it provided a crucial multilateral platform to balance Chinese expansionism without formalising an anti-China alliance.
- **The Prudent Preservation of the Russia Partnership:** Despite intense and sustained pressure from the West, particularly after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, India assiduously preserved its strategic partnership with Moscow. This relationship was anchored in two critical areas: energy and defence. Russia remained the primary supplier of advanced defence hardware, including the S-400 Triumph air defence systems, whose purchase India pursued despite the explicit threat of US sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). This demonstrated a clear hierarchy of interests, where military modernisation and strategic independence trumped alliance solidarity. Furthermore, following the Ukraine invasion, India's massive increase in imports of discounted Russian oil provided a crucial economic cushion, insulating its economy from global energy shocks. This relationship provided India

with strategic depth, an alternative diplomatic channel, and a reliable source of critical resources, ensuring it was not overly dependent on any single power bloc.

- **The De-hyphenation of the Middle East:** India successfully executed a delicate balancing act in the Middle East, a region of vital importance for its energy security and its eight-million-strong diaspora. It de-hyphenated its policy, building strong, independent ties with both Israel and the Arab world. The relationship with Israel was elevated to a strategic partnership, with significant cooperation in defence, agriculture, and water technology. Concurrently, ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE reached new heights, moving beyond a purely buyer-seller energy relationship to encompass significant investment flows and security cooperation. This nuanced diplomacy allowed India to navigate the region's complex rivalries, such as the Qatar blockade, without alienating any major player a stark departure from its historically pro-Arab stance and a master class in pragmatic foreign policy.

## II. Navigating Global Crises

The true mettle of this new, assertive foreign policy was tested not in times of calm, but during two major, epoch-defining global crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War. India's responses to these events revealed both the strengths and the inherent vulnerabilities of its strategic posture.

### Vaccine Maitri

In the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, India launched one of its most ambitious diplomatic initiatives: "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship). As the home of the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, the Serum Institute of India, the country positioned itself as the "pharmacy of the world." It gifted and commercially exported millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses to over 90 countries, from its immediate neighbours in South Asia to nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. This was a masterstroke of diplomatic goodwill, a tangible demonstration of South-South solidarity that positioned India as a reliable, benevolent, and capable power. It served as a potent counterpoint to China's "mask diplomacy," which was often viewed with suspicion and linked to geopolitical conditionalities.

However, the devastating second wave that overwhelmed India in April 2021 forced a dramatic and abrupt halt to these exports. The domestic need for vaccines became so acute that the government had to prioritise its own population, revealing the limitations of its manufacturing capacity and supply chain resilience. The episode was a sobering lesson in the primacy of domestic capability in sustaining global leadership ambitions. While "Vaccine Maitri" generated immense goodwill, its sudden suspension also exposed the risks of over-promising, reminding observers that India's ability to act as a global public goods provider was ultimately constrained by its own developmental challenges.

### The Ukraine War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 presented India with its most complex and high-stakes diplomatic challenge since the end of the Cold War. Contrary to fervent Western expectations, India pointedly

refused to condemn Russia. It adopted a position of what can be best described as "principled ambivalence," consistently calling for dialogue, diplomacy, and a cessation of violence while studiously avoiding any criticism of the aggressor.

This stance, heavily criticised in Western capitals, was not an aberration but the logical culmination of its multi-alignment doctrine. It was a cold, calculated decision based on a hierarchy of core national interests. First and foremost was the preservation of its vital defence relationship with Russia, upon which its military, particularly its air force and armoured corps, remains critically dependent. A rupture with Moscow would have left India dangerously exposed vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. Second, it sought to avoid alienating the United States, with which it shares deep strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific. This balancing act was achieved by intensifying engagement within the Quad while maintaining its position on Ukraine. Third, and crucially, the decision to significantly increase imports of discounted Russian oil was a pragmatic economic masterstroke. It shielded the Indian economy from crippling inflationary pressures, demonstrating that in a choice between geopolitical solidarity and economic stability, New Delhi would unhesitatingly choose the latter.

India's ability to withstand immense diplomatic pressure from its Quad partners and articulate a position based solely on a hard-nosed assessment of its national interest was a definitive moment. It signalled to the world that India had arrived as a truly independent pole in the global system, confident enough to defy the dictates of a US-led order while still engaging with it deeply on its own terms.

## III. Persistent Challenges and Enduring Contradictions

Despite its notable successes and heightened global stature, India's foreign policy trajectory faced significant and persistent challenges that underscore the inherent difficulties of its chosen path.

### The China Conundrum

The fundamental, and potentially most damaging, paradox of the decade was the simultaneous engagement with China in multilateral forums like BRICS, the SCO, and the G20 while managing a hostile, militarised, and increasingly volatile border. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in the first combat deaths on the border in over four decades, was a geopolitical watershed. It shattered the long-held illusion, prevalent in many Indian policy circles, that robust economic ties and diplomatic parlance could insulate the relationship from underlying geopolitical rivalry.

The clash and the subsequent, ongoing military standoff forced a massive and costly deployment of troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), effectively militarising a vast swath of Himalayan territory. This reality check imposed a hard, material limit on the possibilities of multi-alignment. It forced a sharper, more security-focused approach, leading to a ban on hundreds of Chinese mobile applications, increased scrutiny of Chinese investment, and a concerted effort to diversify supply chains away from China. The relationship with Beijing became the primary driver of India's strategic calculus, pushing it closer to the United States and its allies in the Quad, even as it continued to engage with Russia, China's own strategic partner. This triangular dynamic represents the single greatest tension within India's multi-alignment framework.



### The Democracy Narrative

The government's domestic political and social agenda, particularly regarding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and the general treatment of religious minorities, at times complicated its international standing. These actions occasionally drew sharp criticism from Western legislators, human rights organisations, and sections of the international media, creating a persistent, low-grade friction in relationships that were otherwise strengthening on strategic and economic grounds.

The US Congress, for instance, held hearings on the situation in Kashmir, and the issue was periodically raised in high-level meetings. While the executive branches of Western governments, prioritising strategic counterbalancing to China, often downplayed these concerns, they remained a lingering irritant. Managing this tension between sovereign domestic choices and the expectations of its democratic partners remained a delicate, ongoing task for Indian diplomacy, testing its ability to compartmentalise strategic from values-based engagement.

### The sustainability of multi-alignment in a bipolar world

As the US-China rivalry intensifies, the geopolitical space for multi-alignment is likely to contract. The Ukraine War has already demonstrated how secondary powers are being forced to make difficult choices. While India has so far navigated this pressure skilfully, future crises could present even starker binaries. A contingency over Taiwan, for example, would place India in an extraordinarily difficult position, potentially forcing a choice between its Quad partners and its need to avoid a direct confrontation with China. The very structure of the emerging international order, increasingly defined by techno-economic and military blocs, poses an existential challenge to a foreign policy predicated on avoiding blocs altogether.

### Conclusion

As the decade from 2014 to 2024 drew to a close, India's position in the world was undeniably stronger and more influential than at its start. It had successfully navigated a period of unprecedented global volatility by adhering to a flexible, unsentimental, and interest-driven foreign policy. The country was no longer a reluctant power or a moralising voice from the side-lines but an assertive, confident actor, comfortable in its skin and clear in its objectives.

The doctrine of assertive strategic autonomy, while appearing contradictory and occasionally opportunistic to its critics, proved to be a resilient and effective framework for this period. It allowed India to secure its immediate security interests, fuel its economic growth with discounted energy, and maintain a diverse portfolio of strategic partnerships. By 2024, India was viewed not as a formal ally of any single bloc, but as an indispensable, strategic swing state, a pivotal power whose alignment, or lack thereof, could shape the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Every major power, the US, Europe, Russia, and a wary China saw constructive engagement with New Delhi as critical to their own strategic calculus.

The legacy of this decade is an India that has mastered the art of navigating a multipolar world by becoming a central pole in its own right. It has shed its historical hesitations and demonstrated a willingness to take calculated risks, whether on the border with Pakistan, in the diplomatic arena over

Ukraine, or in the realm of global narrative-building. The enduring challenge for the future will be to sustain this complex and demanding balancing act. As the US-China rivalry intensifies and the shadow of the Himalayas grows longer, the contradictions inherent in its strategy will be stretched to their limits. The decade of strategic assertion has set the stage; the next will be the ultimate test of its sustainability, requiring even greater diplomatic dexterity, economic resilience, and military strength to preserve the hard-won autonomy that has become the hallmark of modern India's place in the world.

### References

1. BBC News. COVID: India imposes export ban on antiviral drug remdesivir. London: BBC News; 2021 Apr 23. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56846565>
2. Bennett B. The "Surgical Strike" as a strategic communication: India's new doctrine of limited war. *J Strateg Stud*. 2020;43(5):654-677.
3. Brewster D. The India-Australia security relationship: The search for a special relationship. In: Brewster D, editor. *India and the Indo-Pacific*. London: Routledge; 2022, p. 115-34.
4. Chaudhuri R. *Forged in crisis: India and the United States since 1947*. London: Hurst & Company; 2014.
5. Ganguly S. India's foreign policy at 75: A critical assessment. *Orbis*. 2022;66(3):356-371.
6. Hall I. *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press; 2019.
7. Jaishankar S. *The India way: Strategies for an uncertain world*. New Delhi: HarperCollins India; 2020.
8. Malone DM, Mukherjee R. India and the Ukraine war: A triumph of strategic autonomy. *Wash Q*. 2022;45(4):89-107.
9. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Prime Minister's remarks at the India-Asean Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. New Delhi: MEA; 2015. Available from: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24233>
10. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Official spokesperson's response to media queries on the situation in Ukraine. New Delhi: MEA; 2022. Available from: <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/34960>
11. O'Donnell F, Pant HV. Managing strategic multi-alignment: India in the era of the Quad and BRICS+. *Int Aff*. 2023;99(1):215-33.
12. Panda JP. *India-China relations: The power politics of Delhi-Beijing bilateralism*. London: Routledge; 2021.
13. Saran S. *How India sees the world: Kautilya to the 21st century*. New Delhi: Juggernaut Books; 2017.
14. Scott D. The Quad: A nascent security institution? *Asian Secur*. 2022;18(1):25-43.
15. Singh S. Balakot and the rise of "offensive defence" in Indian security strategy. *J Defence Stud*. 2019;13(3):27-48.
16. The White House. *U.S. and India: Enduring global partners in the 21st century [Fact Sheet]*. Washington, DC: The White House; 2020. Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/us-india-enduring-global-partners-21stcentury>