



From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: India–U.S. Partnership in an Era of Global Power Shifts

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ABSTRACT :

Since independence, India's foreign policy has been anchored in the idea of non-alignment—an avowed refusal to join formal military blocs. Over the last three decades, however, India's strategic behavior has evolved from strict non-alignment toward what scholars call multi-alignment: active engagement with multiple power centers while preserving strategic autonomy. This article traces that evolution and examines its implications for the India–U.S. partnership. It argues that deepening convergence with the United States—across defense, technology, trade, and multilateral coalitions—exists alongside New Delhi's continued ties to Russia, engagement with China, and leadership in South–South forums. This duality produces a distinct “partnership-plus-distance” logic. The paper highlights the institutional and material bases of the bilateral relationship (defence agreements, high-tech cooperation, economic linkages), the constraints that limit its conversion into a formal alliance, and the policy choices available to both capitals. The analysis concludes with recommendations for a pragmatic, interest-based partnership that recognizes India's preference for multi-alignment while pursuing deeper, trust-based cooperation with the U.S.

Keywords: non-alignment, multi-alignment, Pragmatic, Partnership, hedging, multipolar, globalization, Quad, Geostrategic, Cold War.

Introduction

India and the United States arrived at the 21st century with very different Cold War legacies. India, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, became synonymous with *non-alignment*—a platform for newly independent states that sought to avoid entanglement in the U.S.–Soviet bipolar confrontation. The United States, by contrast, developed a global alliance architecture to counter Soviet influence. Over the past three decades, multiple tectonic shifts—China's rise, Russia's post–Cold War recalibration, globalization, and the diffusion of advanced technology—have encouraged New Delhi to diversify its external engagements. The result is a policy often labelled *multi-alignment*: simultaneous cultivation of partnerships with several major powers while preserving India's decision-making freedom. The purpose of this paper is to explain how India's multi-alignment shapes the India–U.S. partnership, to identify sources of convergence and friction, and to offer policy guidance for both capitals.

Conceptualizing Non-Alignment and Multi-Alignment

Non-alignment was originally framed as political and moral posture—an attempt to retain sovereignty of choice during a binary world. It emphasised independence from great-power blocs, anti-colonial solidarity, and a normative agenda for a more equitable international order. In practice, however, India's non-alignment often involved pragmatic balancing: close ties with the Soviet Union at times when New Delhi perceived Western pressure or insecurity.

Multi-alignment is a descriptive, strategic posture in a pluralistic, multipolar world. It entails cultivating deep bilateral ties (including security cooperation) with one or more major powers while preserving the flexibility to engage others. Rather than passive non-alignment, multi-alignment is active hedging: building coalitions where interests align (e.g., maritime security, technology) but refraining from formal alliance commitments that could compromise autonomy. Several recent scholarly works emphasize that India's approach is not ideological drift but a rational response to complexity: it extracts material benefits from multiple partners while avoiding the zero-sum choices of alliance politics.

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Historical Evolution: From Nehru's Non-Alignment to Post-Cold War Recalibration

Early years: normative leadership and strategic caution

In the 1950s and 1960s, India's diplomacy—shaped by Nehru and other post-colonial leaders—championed a Third World voice and resisted alignment with either superpower bloc. Non-alignment provided New Delhi international stature and a moral platform to campaign for decolonisation, disarmament, and a reformed global economy. Yet, when confronted with immediate security threats—most notably the 1971 war and earlier border tensions—India pursued pragmatic arrangements, underscoring that non-alignment coexisted with contingency-based alignments.

Post-1991: liberalization and opening to multiple partners

Economic liberalization beginning in 1991 and the Soviet Union's collapse reduced India's structural dependence on any single patron. New Delhi gradually expanded ties with the United States—culminating in landmark cooperation such as the 2005 civil nuclear rapprochement and, later, the elevation of bilateral ties to a “comprehensive global strategic partnership.” Simultaneously, India retained substantial defense and energy ties with Russia and continued to hedge toward China through trade and diplomacy. This period laid the foundations for the modern multi-aligned .

Drivers of India's Multi-Alignment

Geostrategic Environment (Multipolarity): The emergence of multiple centers of power—China's assertiveness, Russia's continued global role, and a resurgent Europe and Japan—creates opportunities and risks. India prefers diversified ties to maximize options and avoid entrapment.

Security Needs: India faces traditional and non-traditional security challenges (territorial disputes with China, cross-border terrorism, maritime security). Deepening defense cooperation with the U.S. enhances capability, but New Delhi sees value in maintaining functional ties with Russia (major supplier of arms) and other partners.

Economic Interests and Technology Access: India's transformation into a major market and manufacturing hub makes technology partnerships (semiconductors, AI, space) attractive. The U.S. is a critical partner here, but India also seeks trade and investment links with the EU, East Asia, and West Asia.

Domestic Politics and Strategic Culture: India's political leadership—across parties—prizes sovereignty and public perceptions of independence. This domestic political constraint shapes caution about any arrangement that could be perceived as a loss of independence.

Institutional and Normative Preferences: India values multilateral platforms where it can exercise influence (BRICS, G20, NAM legacy). Multi-alignment allows New Delhi to play multiple institutional cards at once.

The India–U.S. Partnership: Areas of Deepening Convergence

Defense and Security Cooperation

Over the last decade, defense cooperation has grown rapidly. A series of foundational agreements—Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA/LEMOA-type arrangements), Communications and Information Security Memorandum (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA)—have institutionalized interoperability and information sharing. The U.S. views India as a security partner in the Indo-Pacific, while India uses these arrangements to bolster maritime domain awareness and force modernization. U.S. policymaking documents and State Department materials underscore this strategic trajectory.

Quad and Mini lateral Coalitions

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia reflects convergence on a free, open Indo-Pacific. While India resists any transformation of the Quad into a military alliance, it utilizes the grouping for maritime security, COVID-era vaccine diplomacy coordination, and technology supply-chain resilience initiatives. The Quad exemplifies how India manages partnerships with like-minded democracies while preserving other relationships.

Technology, Trade, and Investment

Bilateral economic ties have expanded—trade, investment, and technology transfers are now central to the partnership. U.S. firms have invested heavily in Indian manufacturing and services; cooperation in critical technologies (semiconductors, clean energy, space) has become a priority. Yet trade irritants and tariff disputes occasionally strain relations, and both governments have had to manage commercial friction even as they pursue strategic synergy.

High-Level Institutionalization and Strategic Dialogue

Regular high-level dialogues (Presidential/Prime Ministerial meetings, annual 2+2 ministerial dialogues, strategic forums) have institutionalised the relationship, enabling crisis management and sustained policy coordination. Statements from joint ministerial highlight the mutual commitment to sustaining the partnership and to cooperation on global challenges.

Constraints and Sources of Friction

Russia and Strategic Hedging

A principal constraint on the India–U.S. relationship is New Delhi’s continuing defence and energy ties with Russia. Russia remains a major supplier of military hardware and nuclear technology. U.S. sanctions regimes and pressure over third-party energy purchases have occasionally tested the relationship’s limits. India sees Russia as a hedge and a source of strategic autonomy—an insurance policy against regional contingencies.

China Factor: Convergence without Entrapment

Both India and the U.S. view a more assertive China as a strategic challenge. Yet India’s approach to China is complex: extensive bilateral trade, border tensions, and an uneven security calculus generate policy ambiguity. This ambiguity leads India to work with the U.S. on shared concerns (maritime security, supply chains) but to resist doctrinal commitments that would force it into confrontational postures.

Domestic Political Considerations and Public Opinion

Indian public opinion and political narratives prize independence and sovereignty. Any policy perceived to undermine these values can provoke domestic pushback. For the U.S., shifts in domestic politics (trade policy, immigration) and transactional tendencies can create uncertainty that India finds difficult to reconcile with a trust-based partnership.

Operational and Interoperability Limits

Despite institutional agreements, operational interoperability has limits—differences in procurement timelines, defense industrial bases, and rules of engagement mean the partnership is still evolving toward deeper military integration. India’s defense procurement process and indigenous capability development ambitions sometimes slow adoption of U.S. systems.

Explaining the “Partnership-Plus-Distance” Logic

India’s external behavior can be understood as purposeful balancing. The “partnership-plus-distance” logic captures three core elements:

- **Instrumental Engagement:** New Delhi pursues capabilities, technology, and economic benefits through partnership with the U.S. without ceding strategic choice.
- **Hedging through Multiplicity:** By keeping robust ties with Russia, engaging China economically, and leading in South–South forums, India hedges against sudden shifts in great-power dynamics.
- **Normative Autonomy:** India seeks recognition as a major power free to pursue its own security and development agenda—this requires both close partnerships and visible independence.

This constellation is rational in a world where forcing a single alignment could restrict options and provoke counter-reactions. Multi-alignment allows India to optimise gains while minimising vulnerability.

Implications for Regional and Global Order

- **Indo-Pacific Security Architecture:** India’s multi-alignment contributes to a plural Indo-Pacific architecture where Mini laterals (Quad, AUKUS-adjacent dynamics) coexist with varied bilateral ties. This reduces the likelihood of a rigid bloc confrontation but increases the complexity of crisis diplomacy.
- **Arms and Technology Flows:** Continued diversification of defense suppliers implies a multipolar defense market. As India modernizes, it will continue to source from Russia, the U.S., Israel, France, and domestic suppliers—complicating strategic calculations for all suppliers.
- **Economic Networks and Supply Chains:** India’s role in technology supply-chain diversification (semiconductors, pharmaceuticals) offers common ground with the U.S., but trade disputes and industrial policy divergences can impede deeper economic integration.

Multilateral Governance: India’s insistence on strategic autonomy means it will often seek leadership roles in multilateral fora rather than being a predictable vote for any single pole. This can be an asset for coalition building on climate, development, and reform of international institutions.

Policy Options and Recommendations

- **For policymakers in New Delhi: Clarify Red Lines but Deepen Practical Cooperation:** Maintain strategic autonomy but operationalize cooperation in areas that deliver tangible returns—maritime domain awareness, logistics, joint R&D. This builds trust without formal alliance commitments.
- **Strengthen Defense Industrial Collaboration:** Encourage co-development and co-production with U.S. firms and facilitate technology transfer to reduce procurement frictions and align industrial timelines.
- **Manage Russia Relations Transparently:** Explain and institutionalize the rationale for continued ties with Russia (legacy platforms, defense industrial base) to reduce strategic misunderstanding with the U.S.

- **Economic Policy Alignment:** Pursue bilateral mechanisms to address trade irritants and harmonise standards to unlock deeper technology cooperation.

For policymakers in Washington:

- **Respect Strategic Autonomy:** Recognize that India's multi-alignment is a strategic choice driven by sovereign considerations; pressuring India to choose sides risks backsliding.
- **Be Predictable on Trade and Technology:** Reduce transactional policy swings and provide stable incentives for long-term industrial partnerships (semiconductors, clean energy).
- **Support Defense Modernizations Thoughtfully:** Offer capacity-building that complements India's existing platforms (including legacy Russian equipment) and prioritise interoperability through training and shared exercises.
- **Use Multilateral Platforms:** Cooperate with India in multilateral fora where convergence exists—climate finance, development infrastructure, and global health—to build habituated cooperation that transcends bilateral turbulence.

Conclusion

The trajectory from Nehru's doctrine of non-alignment to contemporary multi-alignment is less a repudiation of past principles and more an adaptation to a more complex international environment. India's multi-alignment preserves policy space while enabling deeper cooperation with powers such as the United States. The India–U.S. partnership today is robust and multifaceted—anchored in defense cooperation, technology, and shared democratic values—yet constrained by India's ties to other powers and a domestic strategic culture that prizes autonomy. Both capitals would benefit from a mature, interest-based partnership that acknowledges this reality: a relationship that is deep where interests align and flexible where strategic sovereignty requires it. Managing expectations on both sides—respect for India's multi-alignment and U.S. insistence on trust and predictability—will be decisive in shaping the partnership's future.

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