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## Strategic Autonomy: Rethinking Indian Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17876317>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 15-11-2025

**Published:** 10-12-2025

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**Keywords:**

*Indo-Pacific, strategic autonomy, partnership, cooperation, hedging.*

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study and analyse the importance of the concept of strategic autonomy on the Indian foreign policy and the consequences it will have on the Indo-Pacific region. The term strategic autonomy is not new. The term needs to be redefined on the lines of Indian aspirations, values, demands and ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper will argue that while pursuing its interests in the region it needs to take into confidence other countries and major powers in the context of the changing geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics in the region. While pursuing the principle of strategic autonomy, India has also been following the strategy of Hedging. The rising power status and the refusal to be dictated by the rules set out by the major powers signifies that strategic autonomy aligns with India's national interest and objectives of foreign policy. India aims to approach any tension in the region in a firm and cooperative manner, a strategy that does not adversely affect its ambitions in the region. This calls for forging alliances and partnerships to suit the needs and demands and balance threats in order to secure a cordial and stable environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

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### Introduction: -

With the opening up of the economy, India has connected with its neighbours in the Indian Ocean region and key maritime forces around the world. The Indian ocean has become an increasingly important



source of energy and minerals. India has engaged with neighbouring nations on both bilateral and multilateral levels. From Look East strategy to Act East policy, there has been a shift towards stronger economic ties with ASEAN, China, Japan and Australia. India is making sure on all fronts that its presence cannot be ignored in the Indian ocean region.

The 'Indo-Pacific' region is seen to be an extensive area, making it difficult to form a cohesive strategic framework. But in recent years, it has become associated with the idea where the balance of power has shifted on a global scale. The region is of immense economic value to India and the world. It is a major source and destination of foreign direct investment and has vast reserves of marine resources like offshore hydrocarbons, methane hydrates, seabed minerals and rare earth metals. For the first time in contemporary history, Asian nations have invested more in their militaries and defence in 2012 than did European nations. The United States is attempting to integrate economically with the Asian economies in addition to bolstering defence relationships. The US is engaging in the field of agriculture, food security, connectivity, education, energy security, the environment and more. The US is continuously forming international alliances with nations in South East Asia and South Asia.

The region has gained attention in recent years, with the economic rise of India and China and the resultant power shifts with the United States. The nations surrounding China are forging cooperative economic relations with China but at the same time are cautious of the military challenges that China will pose. India in this circumstance seems a peaceful alternative that believes in inclusiveness and equality of all in the region. The narrative on cooperation, competition and conflict in the regions along with the break down of once one region Asia into smaller sub-regional zones and calls for visualizing a new framework based on consensus, cooperation and autonomy.

The fact that there is no apparent argument about India's advancement does not imply that its foreign policy has remained stagnant. The rise in India's relative and absolute power in the global structure has already resulted in significant changes in its global conduct. The reshaping of India's foreign and security policies, like its economic reforms, has occurred gradually and in stages, with little public attention. If we believe that India's power position has changed and continues to improve alongside its rapid economic growth, then the country's foreign policy will be drastically reshaped and revamped into a political orientation that will be radically different from what we have been used to till now. As a result, a new national framework on foreign policy will develop. That new framework and consensus would demand an intense reinterpretation of some of the key assumptions that have fueled India's foreign policy for the



previous decades, setting in place a new paradigm altogether. The following is an analysis of some of those concepts.

Autonomy is an enabling concept and a tool of empowerment. An autonomous actor has the liberty to decide and choose their objectives and goals based on its priorities and also with which actors it wants to seek partnership and alliance. Sometimes autonomy has been incorrectly understood in a limited sense. It does not mean autarchy or isolation or rejection of alliances. In an interconnected globalized world isolation or autarchy is not possible and suitable. Partners and alliances are necessary for promoting and protecting common interests and goals. Autonomy is understood as a Relational term, it is realized in relation to others. It is conceptualised as an objective or tool to achieve the desired results but it is not an end in itself. Strategic autonomy is presently a concept and a tool for Indian foreign policy.

The concept of strategic autonomy is most popularly considered as the foundational premise of independent India's foreign policy. Considering the significant legacy and passion associated with the concept of autonomy one might justifiably question whether the emphasis on autonomy is a fundamental and permanent cornerstone of Indian foreign policy or the result of a specific historical condition. Countries categorized as Great powers i.e. those with global economic, political and military influence, abstain from deliberating about autonomy. In the absence of global leadership, it becomes the responsibility of the great powers to create and sustain a sense of order in international affairs. Put another way, great powers set the guidelines for everyone else. Most countries acknowledge and follow the rules because they are aware that a rule-based order is better for their national interests than anarchy (Mohan, 2008). Only the countries with a national determination to increase their relative and absolute power position assert that they will not allow the international system to limit their freedom of action and define their rules and they pay the cost of this defiance.

Advocates of the concept argue that strategic autonomy was natural for a nascent independent country like India who had to navigate its trajectory in the global system. India's founding fathers had envisaged India's pivotal role in global affairs. As a developing weak post-colonial country, India had a strong will to prevent other countries from limiting its freedom for manoeuvre and deciding the course of action. It refused to comply with rules it deemed discriminatory or unjust. Seven decades later, as India moves closer to becoming the world's fourth largest economy, should or would autonomy be the primary goal of India's foreign policy? This paper explore the concept of strategic autonomy and also study Indian foreign policy adopting the principle and tool of strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. This paper will argue that in a wide, open and ambiguous Indo-Pacific which has started to become a battleground of



major powers, strategic autonomy will prove to be a suitable, viable and pragmatic foreign policy tool for India.

### **Conceptual and Historical Debates on Strategic Autonomy**

Strategic autonomy has a wide understanding and encompasses the entire spectrum of foreign policy, security and defence. Strategic autonomy refers to the capability to set priorities and make one's own decisions regarding foreign policy and security, with the appropriate institutional, political and material resources to implement and execute the decisions, either in partnership or independently. Strong strategic autonomy involves setting, modifying and implementing international rules, rather than blindly following the rules set out by others. In everyday lingo it means the 'trend setter'. Being subject to strategic decisions made by others, such as the powerful countries and institutions is not the same as having strategic autonomy. Hence, strategic autonomy which is understood as a realist version of traditional non-alignment is a set of objectives and principles that is aimed at forging a balance between independence in foreign policy decision making and seeking to establish partnership with powerful states and institutions to fulfill its national interest and foreign policy goals.

Foreign policy of newly independent India was primarily based on the pursuit of strategic autonomy, in the form of Non-alignment. However the specific interpretation and application of this idea underwent changes over time and under different leaders. Early scholarship, particularly by J. N. Dixit presents autonomy as a continuation of Nehruvian policy of non-alignment, which was intended to protect India's nascent sovereignty in a bipolar Cold War world. This research emphasises that non-alignment was not a form of equidistance, but rather an endeavour to optimise freedom of action while maintaining and practising independent decision making in the face of bipolar competition to attain superpower status (Dixit, 2003).

With the Cold War coming to an end, strategists and experts were debating whether strategic autonomy would be still relevant in the global order. C. Raja Mohan argues that India's foreign policy objectives demanded integration with the global system as well as maintaining selected partnership with the US (Mohan, 2003). Autonomy still remained rhetorically crucial. Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi propose a different idea of autonomy and redefined autonomy as 'relative autonomy' rather than absolute independence, taking into account the reality of globalisation and great-power rivalry argue that India aspires to reshape the global order in line with its normative preferences, particularly strategic autonomy



and multipolarity. Their analysis places India's alignment with the U.S. within the broader context of values-based realism (Pant, 2016).

However, not all academics concur to the adaptable nature of autonomy. For some, notably in Indian strategic study, autonomy is viewed as the foundation of sovereignty and national pride, which is impervious to compromise. Former policymakers, like Jaswant Singh, defined autonomy in normative terms, associating it with the maintaining India's strategic personality in the global order. Others, like Srinath Raghavan advocate a more realistic standpoint, showing how autonomy has historically been manipulated rather than being treated as sacrosanct (Raghvan, 2018). Indian leaders used autonomy selectively, either to justify independence from Western pressures or to rationalise pragmatic alignments when required.

According to Shyam Saran, since independence Indian foreign policy has been based on the foundational principles of flexibility in policy making and inclusiveness. He defines strategic autonomy as the ability to formulate and implement independent decisions on crucial matters (Saran, 2017). Continuously expanding the scope and chances of such kind of autonomy is the identification of a successful independent foreign policy making. Narrative on strategic autonomy often takes us back to the concept of non-alignment, which was India's response to the bipolar world. The desire to maintain independent and autonomous foreign policy decision making was linked to economic autarky.

Recent research and scholarly debates have proposed the concept of 'multi-alignment' or 'multi-directional agreements' as a practical expression of autonomy in the age of globalization and interdependence (Pande, 2017). Instead of rejecting alliances openly, India today partners with numerous nations, like the United States, Russia, China, Japan and France, while avoiding permanent obligations. While this might be true, this paper argues that strategic autonomy remains the foundational principle of India's foreign policy specially in the debates revolving around the Indo-Pacific.

Scholars such as Tanvi Madan suggest that this approach allows India to enhance collaboration with the United States while avoiding overdependence by preserving connections with Russia and engaging in discussion with China (Madan, 2020). India has adopted the policy of strategic hedging, in order to maximise benefits and minimise losses. This understanding of autonomy confuses basic dichotomies of alignment and independence and lays the groundwork for understanding India's varied response to US expectations.



Rohan Mukherjee and David M. Malone address the conceptual ambiguity surrounding autonomy in India's foreign policy language. They criticise the romanticisation of autonomy in Indian strategic thinking, claiming that its practical application differs depending on circumstance and political leadership. They argue that the domestic politics of the country plays a vital role in determining which among the numerous security challenges should be given attention. Hence, they advocate redefining autonomy as the freedom to participate on one's own terms, rather than as a kind of opposition to cooperation (Mukherjee, 2011).

In one of the foundational works C. Raja Mohan, underscores the shift in India's foreign policy thinking under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Mohan argues that India is moving away from traditional non-alignment posture to a more assertive global posture that still prioritizes autonomy in decision-making and foreign policy. His analysis provides an early justification for India's increasing defense collaboration with the U.S. without abandoning its independent foreign policy (Mohan, 2015).

Ashley Tellis, a leading scholar on India-US strategic affairs, has extensively studied the trajectory of bilateral relations between the two countries. Tellis argues that the post-2000 phase of India-US relations marked a qualitative departure from previous decades of mistrust. He emphasizes that while both sides share converging interests on certain areas, particularly in balancing China, structural differences still remain, notably India's reluctance to enter into binding alliances (Tellis, 2015).

Strategic autonomy has also been conceptualized through the lens of hedging. David Brewster, He notes that India's foreign policy increasingly reflects hedging strategies that allow engagement with the U.S. and other Indo-Pacific powers while avoiding entanglement. Brewster shows how India participates in Quad exercises and signs interoperability agreements like GSOMIA and CISMOA without altering its long-standing doctrine of avoiding permanent alliances (Brewster, 2012).

Daniel Kliman and Iskander Rehman, further develop the concept of strategic hedging. They explain how India calibrates its strategic goals with available capabilities by forming flexible alignments. He asserts that foundational agreements with the U.S. offer India operational advantages without political liabilities, a hallmark of hedging (Kliman, 2019).

Indian scholarship remains divided because of the China factor. On one hand scholars like Brahma Chellaney views the Indo-U.S partnership as a strategic necessity for countering China's assertiveness from the Himalayan border to the Indian Ocean (Chellany, 2011). On the other hand, scholars such as Shivshankar Menon argues that India must avoid situations that pushed India to being locked into binary



choices, stressing the need to preserve maneuverability and a scope for autonomy while dealing with both China and the U.S. He cautions against over-commitment with the U.S, warning that India risks undermining its autonomy and alienating other partners such as Russia and ASEAN nations if it leans too heavily on the U.S. This debate stresses the need to adopt hedging strategies, where India should seek to balance cooperation with great powers while simultaneously diversifying their partnerships to avoid overdependence (Menon, 2016).

### **Strategic Autonomy and the Indo-Pacific**

For India the Indo-Pacific is considered as the open, inclusive, integrated and balanced space for all the nations in the Indian and Pacific Ocean, which is aimed at achieving prosperity, stability and growth for all. India has undertaken major initiatives like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), Act East Policy and others. The debate on strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific region conveys two meanings. First, centres around the concept of sovereignty and alliance making with the West. Secondly, upholding the Indian principles of plurality, diversity and inclusiveness.

Strategic autonomy as a concept and tool of foreign policy becomes crucial for India when navigating its trajectory in the Indo-Pacific region. When applied to the four C's of the Act East Policy- Culture, Commerce, Connectivity and Capacity Building or to the four pillars of IPEF- Trade, Supply Chain Resilience, Clean Economy and Fair Economy, the concept of strategic autonomy becomes an important tool to pursue these objectives independently and autonomously. Strategic autonomy directly affects all the above objectives and agendas. Strategic autonomy as a tool of foreign policy is important for India in the Indo-Pacific since the region has now attracted the major powers of the world. It will help India to choose its own interest in the multi-aligned world system.

Strategic autonomy explicitly affects India's objectives of Connectivity, Maritime Security, Liberal international order, Regionalism and Inclusiveness in the Indo-Pacific. As India desires and gears to engage with partners and countries in the region, the challenge of geopolitical rivalries and zero-sum game have started to develop affecting the dynamics in the region. Sub-regional and minilateral groups have evolved to prominence like the QUAD and RCEP. In response the Indian government has started to engage in geopolitical, security and economic partnerships and alignments. India is also playing the Hedging game to secure its diverse interests in the region. Strategic autonomy is manifested in the values of diversity, democracy and pluralism, which are intrinsic to Indian values.



The Indian government has redefined strategic autonomy as an intrinsic objective of Indian foreign policy that can be realised through engaging in increasing partnerships and cooperation, rather than avoiding partnerships. Rising power India, with its own ambition and interests, refuses to be guided and act according to the rules set out by other countries in the Indo-Pacific. Limiting itself only to the US will alienate China and Russia, the two powers that hold economic significance to India and India is not ready to do so. Taking neutral positions and its hesitancy to be a part of any active military alliances in the Indo-Pacific indicates that hedging and strategic autonomy will prove to be a significant tool to achieve the great power status in the region. India's engagement with institutions like BRICS, QUAD, SCO and G20 is a manifestation of the pursuit of strategic autonomy in relation to great powers.

### **Conclusion**

Strategic autonomy remains a guiding principle and cornerstone of India's foreign policy, specially in the case of the Indo-Pacific region. Indo-Pacific is characterised by geopolitical tensions but at the same time demands geo-economic interdependence and cooperation among the countries. Understanding and learning from the past, strategic autonomy connotes independence, flexibility, self-reliance, cooperation and multi-alignment. India's understanding of strategic autonomy is shaped by both internal factors like its belief in democracy, inclusiveness, openness, prosperity for all in the region, as well as external factors like regional instability, US-China rivalry, Chinese adventurism and economic interdependence.

Strategic autonomy as a principle and tool will continue to dictate the objectives of Indian foreign policy. In the Indo-Pacific region strategic autonomy will not be associated with non-alignment or economic autarky. However, the emerging, diverse, open and pluralistic nature and narrative of the Indo-Pacific will unfold a different meaning of strategic autonomy for India i.e. pursue the objectives, ambitions and Indian values in the waters of Indian and Pacific oceans more cautiously. Strategic autonomy will allow India to maintain flexibility and independence in foreign relations while avoiding the chances of entanglements, threats and rigid partnerships. Historically this strategy has helped India maintain a balanced relations with two major powers with conflicting interests.

However, this strategy can pose challenges to India's foreign relations. India has often been criticized in the global platforms for its reluctance to explicitly call out the actions of countries like Russia or its hesitancy to take firm stands on certain global conflicts and issues. This attitude has been perceived as an ambiguous posture about its commitment to a rule-based global order. This can potentially damage India's credibility and affect its power in the regional and global structure. By maintaining 'strategic



silence' on crucial global issue, India risks long term reputational damage and the cautious approach would lead to missing out on opportunities. India's strategic autonomy has been dubbed as 'quiet and patient diplomacy' and the neutral positions of contentious issues raises concerns about India's commitment to democratic values.

Restraints or abstaining from taking firm stands may be fruitful in safeguarding short-term interests but it will come at a cost. India might compromise its credibility and influence as a stable and secure partner in the global stage. To achieve a credible global power stature India needs to rethink its approach, needs to balance autonomy with principled positions on contentious issues. Aligning its actions with the Indian values of democracy diversity, pluralism and inclusivity while at the same time forging cooperative alliances and partnerships with countries that leaves scope for India to ave its independent and autonomous stands will be beneficial specially in the Indo-Pacific region. This will enable India to reinforce its commitment to a rule-based order and enhance its reputation as a secure, stable and responsible regional and global leader.

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