



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL**
**ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE TRUMP

2.0 ERA: MULTI-ALIGNMENT, GREAT-POWER

COMPETITION AND FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES

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Abstract

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in January 2025 has created a new environment for India's foreign policy. India has traditionally sought to preserve strategic autonomy by avoiding formal alignment with any major power while maintaining relationships with multiple states according to its national interests. During the Cold War, this approach was expressed through non-alignment. In the post-Cold War period, and particularly under Narendra Modi, it has increasingly developed into a policy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. India has simultaneously strengthened its strategic partnership with the United States, maintained its longstanding relationship with Russia, managed strategic competition with China, and participated in institutions such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Quad, G20 and other multilateral platforms.

This paper examines how the Trump 2.0 era has affected India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. It argues that Trump's transactional approach to trade, technology, security and burden-sharing creates both opportunities and constraints for New Delhi. The United States remains important for India's defence modernization, advanced technology, economic cooperation and Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, American pressure concerning Russia, trade and energy creates challenges for India's freedom of action. India's relationship with China also remains central because of the unresolved boundary question and broader strategic competition. Recent developments indicate that India is responding not through formal alignment but through a combination of internal strengthening, diversified partnerships, issue-based cooperation and multilateral engagement. Thus, Trump 2.0 has not ended India's strategic autonomy; rather, it has made its practice more demanding and transactional. The paper concludes that multi-alignment remains an important instrument through which India seeks to preserve policy flexibility in an increasingly competitive international system.

Keywords: India, Strategic Autonomy, Trump 2.0, Multi-alignment, United States, Russia, China, BRICS, Indo-Pacific, Foreign Policy

1. Introduction

The international system has undergone significant geopolitical transformation in the twenty-first century. The post-Cold War period was initially characterized by strong American predominance, but the international distribution of power has gradually become more complex. China has emerged as a major economic and military power, Russia continues to possess significant strategic capabilities, and countries such as India have acquired greater importance in global politics. At the same time, international institutions and groupings such as BRICS, the G20, the SCO and the Quad have become important platforms for diplomatic engagement. For India, this changing environment has created both opportunities and challenges. India seeks closer cooperation with major powers but does not want its foreign policy to become dependent on any single power. This approach is commonly described as **strategic autonomy**. Strategic autonomy refers to the capacity of a state to make independent foreign-policy decisions according to its own national interests rather than being compelled to follow the preferences of another major power.

The idea has historical roots in India's non-alignment policy during the Cold War. However, contemporary strategic autonomy differs from classical non-alignment. During the Cold War, non-alignment was largely associated with avoiding membership in competing military blocs. Contemporary India, by contrast, actively develops partnerships with several major powers at the same time. India can cooperate with the United States through the Quad and defence and technology partnerships while maintaining defence and energy relations with Russia and participating in BRICS and the SCO. It can compete with China in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously engaging Beijing through multilateral institutions.

S. Jaishankar's *The India Way* provides an important intellectual perspective on this approach. It emphasizes the importance of flexibility and national interest in an uncertain international environment (Jaishankar, 2020). Similarly, O'Donnell and Papa (2021) demonstrate that India has managed relationships with Russia and China through a combination of bilateral diplomacy and multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the SCO. More recent research by Zomuanthanga and Shekhawat (2026) interprets India's simultaneous participation in BRICS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as an example of multi-alignment designed to preserve strategic autonomy.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 has created a new context for this strategy. The second Trump administration has emphasized economic nationalism, trade negotiations, technology competition, burden-sharing and transactional diplomacy. Christopher Clary argues that there is substantial strategic convergence between India and the United States, but that India must also manage disagreements arising from American trade and technology policies. He further argues that the broader direction of Trump's foreign policy may reinforce India's commitment to multi-alignment

The United States has assumed a central role in India's contemporary strategic and foreign-policy engagements. Cooperation includes defence, technology, trade, maritime security, intelligence and the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, India has continued to avoid a formal alliance with Washington. Russia remains important because of longstanding defence cooperation, energy relations and diplomatic links. This relationship has become more complicated because of the Russia-Ukraine war and Western sanctions.

China presents a different challenge. India and China are major neighbouring powers with extensive economic relations, but their relationship is affected by the unresolved boundary dispute and strategic competition. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash significantly changed India's approach to China. Recent scholarship argues that India has combined military measures with diplomatic and multilateral forms of soft balancing through institutions such as BRICS, SCO, RIC and IBSA.

This article is guided by the following central research question:

How has the Trump 2.0 era affected India's pursuit and practice of strategic autonomy?

The paper also addresses three related questions:

1. How does India manage its growing strategic partnership with the United States while maintaining relations with Russia?
2. How does China's rise and the India-China strategic competition influence India's foreign-policy choices?
3. Does multi-alignment provide India with sufficient flexibility to preserve strategic autonomy?

The central argument is that **Trump 2.0 has not fundamentally abandoned India's strategic autonomy, but it has increased the costs and complexity of maintaining it.** India's response has been to deepen cooperation with the United States where interests converge, preserve important relations with Russia, manage competition with China, and expand diplomatic options through multiple institutions and partnerships.

2. Literature Review

The literature on Indian foreign policy has increasingly moved from the traditional concept of non-alignment toward strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and hedging.

2.1 From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy

Classical studies of Indian foreign policy emphasize non-alignment as a central principle of India's Cold War diplomacy. India did not formally join either the US-led or Soviet-led military bloc. The policy provided India with diplomatic flexibility and reflected the importance given to sovereignty, independence and freedom of decision-making.

However, the international environment changed substantially after the end of the Cold War. The disappearance of the bipolar system reduced the relevance of traditional non-alignment. India subsequently developed closer relations with the United States while simultaneously maintaining relations with Russia, China and other powers.

Bajpai and Pant (2013) and Pant (2016) explain the transformation of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period as a process of adapting to changing global power structures. India increasingly sought to integrate itself into the international system while maintaining autonomy in decision-making.

Jaishankar (2020) provides a more contemporary interpretation. He emphasizes that India must engage with the world from a position based on its own interests rather than accepting rigid ideological or geopolitical alignments. This provides an intellectual foundation for the concept of strategic autonomy.

2.2 Multi-Alignment

O'Donnell and Papa (2021) provide an important contribution by examining India's management of relations with Russia and China through the Russia–India–China triangle. Their analysis demonstrates that India does not treat bilateral relationships and multilateral institutions as mutually exclusive. Instead, it uses different platforms to pursue different interests.

India's membership in BRICS and the SCO while simultaneously strengthening relations with the United States is particularly important. Such behaviour demonstrates that strategic autonomy does not require India to maintain equal distance from all major powers. Instead, it allows India to cooperate differently with different countries depending on the issue.

Zomuanthanga and Shekhawat (2026) extend this argument by examining India's engagement

with BRICS and IPEF. They interpret this dual engagement as multi-alignment in a multipolar system. According to their analysis, India uses different institutional platforms to balance competing strategic pressures and protect national interests.

2.3 India–US Relations

The literature on India-US relations generally identifies a substantial convergence of interests. These include China's growing power, Indo-Pacific security, defence technology, maritime security and economic cooperation.

Clary (2025) provides an important analysis of India-US relations during the second Trump administration. He identifies significant strategic and ideological convergence but also highlights possible tensions regarding trade and technology. His analysis suggests that India's strategic autonomy remains important even as bilateral cooperation expands.

Recent analysis by Carnegie and RSIS similarly emphasizes that Trump 2.0 has created greater uncertainty in the relationship. Carnegie argues that India has adjusted to a more transactional American approach without abandoning its broader strategy. RSIS notes that Indian policymakers continue to recognize the importance of the United States for economic growth, military modernization and diplomatic objectives, while historical concerns about American reliability remain relevant.

2.4 India–Russia Relations

Russia remains an important component of India's strategic autonomy. The relationship developed significantly during the Cold War and continued after 1991. Defence cooperation has historically been particularly important.

The Russia-Ukraine war created a major challenge because India faced pressure from Western countries to reduce its engagement with Moscow. India nevertheless continued diplomatic and economic engagement with Russia while simultaneously strengthening its relationship with the United States and Europe.

This illustrates the practical nature of Indian strategic autonomy. India does not necessarily accept the geopolitical preferences of one partner when those preferences conflict with its own perceived interests.

2.5 India–China Relations

China represents one of the most significant structural challenges to India's foreign policy. The 2020 Galwan crisis transformed bilateral relations. India strengthened military deployments,

increased restrictions in sensitive economic sectors and deepened cooperation with partners such as the United States, Japan and Australia.

Hall (2025) argues that India's post-Galwan strategy includes soft balancing through RIC, BRICS, SCO and IBSA. His research demonstrates that India does not rely exclusively on military balancing; it also uses multilateral institutions to protect and advance its interests.

Recent developments show both competition and limited stabilization. Reuters reported in September 2026 that India-China relations had moved from the intense confrontation following Galwan toward cautious stabilization, although significant disputes and strategic distrust remained.

2.6 Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial analysis of India's strategic autonomy, India-US relations, India-Russia relations and India-China competition. However, the return of Trump in 2025 introduces a relatively new environment in which these relationships interact simultaneously.

The research gap addressed by this paper is therefore the **combined examination of Trump 2.0, India's relations with the United States and Russia, China-related strategic pressures, and multi-alignment as a mechanism of strategic autonomy.**

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This paper uses three interconnected concepts: **strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and hedging.**

3.1 Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy means the ability of a state to make independent decisions regarding its security, economy and foreign relations. It does not mean isolation from the international system.

For India, strategic autonomy involves maintaining sufficient freedom of action to cooperate with one major power without becoming dependent upon it. India can therefore deepen defence cooperation with the United States while maintaining energy and defence links with Russia.

Strategic autonomy can be understood through four dimensions:

1. **Political autonomy** – freedom to make independent diplomatic decisions.
2. **Strategic autonomy** – freedom to determine national security priorities.

3. **Economic autonomy** – reducing excessive dependence on a single economic partner.
4. **Technological autonomy** – developing domestic capabilities and diversified technology partnerships.

3.2 Multi-Alignment

Multi-alignment is the contemporary operational form of strategic autonomy. It involves maintaining relationships with several major powers simultaneously.

India's participation in the Quad, BRICS, SCO, G20 and other institutions demonstrates this approach. These organizations have different memberships and objectives, but India uses each according to specific interests.

Thus:

Non-alignment → Strategic autonomy → Multi-alignment

This progression does not mean that earlier policies disappeared completely. Rather, India's policy has adapted to changing international conditions.

3.3 Hedging

Hedging refers to maintaining multiple strategic options when the future direction of international politics is uncertain. Instead of choosing one side, a state cooperates with competing powers while preparing for different possible developments.

India's relations with the United States, Russia and China contain elements of such behaviour. However, hedging should not be understood as simple neutrality. India may cooperate closely with one country in one area while competing with it in another.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The paper therefore uses the following framework:

External pressures → National interests → Strategic choices → Multi-alignment → Strategic autonomy

Trump 2.0 represents an external pressure. India's national interests determine its response. Strategic choices involve cooperation, balancing, diversification and institutional engagement. Multi-alignment then provides mechanisms through which India attempts to preserve strategic autonomy.

4. Methodology

This study uses a **qualitative research methodology** based primarily on secondary sources. The research draws upon academic journal articles, books, government documents, policy papers and recent analytical reports. Key academic sources include Clary (2025), O'Donnell and Papa (2021), Hall (2025), and Zomuanthanga and Shekhawat (2026). Government sources, particularly documents of India's Ministry of External Affairs, are used to examine India's official positions.

The study uses **descriptive and analytical methods**. The descriptive component identifies major developments in India's relations with the United States, Russia and China. The analytical component examines how these developments affect India's strategic autonomy.

The period of primary attention is **2025–2026**, corresponding to the second Trump administration. However, historical developments from the Cold War and post-Cold War periods are included to explain the evolution of strategic autonomy.

The study does not attempt to predict the future direction of Indian foreign policy. Instead, it examines current patterns and the choices available to India within a changing international environment.

5. Strategic Autonomy and the Evolution of Indian Foreign Policy

India's strategic autonomy has evolved considerably since independence.

During the Cold War, India's foreign policy was strongly associated with non-alignment. India sought to avoid military alliances and maintain diplomatic independence. Nevertheless, non-alignment did not mean complete neutrality. India maintained close relations with the Soviet Union while also engaging the United States and other Western countries.

After the Cold War, India's strategic environment changed. The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced India's dependence on Moscow, while economic liberalization increased India's engagement with Western economies.

The relationship with the United States gradually expanded. The civil nuclear agreement, defence cooperation and growing Indo-Pacific engagement reflected this transformation.

Simultaneously, India sought to preserve its longstanding strategic relationship with Russia. Defence cooperation remained important, and new areas such as energy and space cooperation developed.

Under Narendra Modi, this approach became increasingly associated with multi-alignment. India participated in the Quad while remaining a member of BRICS and the SCO. It

strengthened relations with the United States, Japan, Australia, France and European countries while maintaining relations with Russia and engaging China.

The underlying principle is therefore not equal distance but **freedom of choice**.

This distinction is important. Strategic autonomy does not require India to reject partnerships. Rather, partnerships are acceptable when they increase India's capabilities without eliminating its ability to make independent decisions.

The contemporary challenge is that major-power competition is becoming more intense. As rivalry between the United States and China increases, maintaining relationships with both Western and non-Western institutions becomes more difficult.

6. India–US Relations under Trump 2.0

India-US relations have become one of the most important components of India's external strategy. Cooperation includes defence, technology, trade, intelligence, maritime security and the Indo-Pacific.

The United States is particularly important for India's efforts to develop advanced defence and technological capabilities. Cooperation with Washington also supports India's role in the Indo-Pacific and provides opportunities for greater integration into global supply chains.

However, Trump 2.0 has introduced greater transactional pressure into the relationship.

Clary identifies substantial strategic convergence between India and the United States but also highlights tensions involving trade and technology. He argues that India must manage Trump's neomercantilist tendencies while maintaining the broader strategic relationship.

The Carnegie Endowment's 2026 analysis similarly argues that Trump 2.0 has reduced India's expectation that Washington will consistently provide strategic concessions in support of broader geopolitical objectives. According to the analysis, India has responded through adjustment rather than a fundamental realignment.

This is significant for strategic autonomy. A closer relationship with Washington can strengthen India's military and technological capabilities, but excessive dependence could reduce policy flexibility.

India therefore has an interest in deepening cooperation while preserving independent decision-making.

The Quad provides a useful example. India cooperates with the United States, Japan and Australia on maritime security and Indo-Pacific issues but has not converted the Quad into a formal military alliance.

The strategic logic is therefore:

Cooperation without formal alliance.

This allows India to gain benefits from American capabilities while retaining room for independent foreign-policy choices.

7. India–Russia Relations: Energy and Defence

Russia remains an important element of India's strategic autonomy.

The India-Russia relationship has deep historical foundations. Defence cooperation has been one of its strongest pillars. Russia has supplied India with major military platforms and technologies over several decades.

Energy has become increasingly important in recent years. India's engagement with Russian energy has continued despite Western pressure following the Russia-Ukraine war.

This creates a complicated situation for India. On one side, India seeks deeper strategic cooperation with the United States and other Western countries. On the other, India considers continued engagement with Russia important for energy security, defence requirements and broader geopolitical interests.

The Trump 2.0 period has increased this tension because Washington has used trade and economic instruments to encourage countries to reduce reliance on Russian energy. Yet India's position has remained focused on national interests and energy security.

This illustrates the practical meaning of strategic autonomy. India does not automatically adopt the policy preferences of its strategic partners.

Russia also remains useful to India in multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the SCO. Maintaining communication with Moscow also provides India with another diplomatic channel in a changing international system.

Nevertheless, India's Russia policy also faces constraints. Russia's growing dependence on China, the continuing Ukraine war, Western sanctions and changes in global defence markets create new challenges.

Therefore, India's Russia relationship is changing, but it has not become irrelevant to strategic autonomy.

8. India–China Relations and the Strategic Environment

China represents perhaps the most complicated external challenge to Indian strategic autonomy.

A longstanding and unresolved boundary dispute remains a central issue in India–China relations. The 2020 Galwan clash was a major turning point. Hall describes the post-Galwan period as a significant transformation in India's China strategy, including stronger military preparedness and greater use of multilateral and minilateral mechanisms.

India has subsequently strengthened cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia through the Quad and other Indo-Pacific initiatives. At the same time, India has continued to participate in BRICS and the SCO, where China is also a major member.

This apparently contradictory behaviour is actually central to India's multi-alignment strategy. India competes with China in the Indo-Pacific and along the Himalayan frontier but does not completely disengage from China economically or diplomatically.

Recent developments demonstrate this complexity. Reuters reported in September 2026 that bilateral relations had moved from the severe tensions following Galwan toward cautious stabilization, while substantial disputes remained.

India's approach can therefore be described as **competition combined with selective engagement**.

China also influences India's relationship with the United States. The Chinese challenge creates strong incentives for India and the United States to cooperate. However, India does not want its China policy to become completely dependent on Washington.

This distinction is critical. India's strategic partnership with the United States is partly strengthened by common concerns regarding China, but India's China policy remains an Indian policy rather than simply an extension of American strategy.

Hall's analysis of India's use of soft balancing in RIC, BRICS, SCO and IBSA further demonstrates that India uses different institutions for different strategic purposes.

Thus, China is both a constraint and a factor encouraging India to diversify its partnerships.

9. Multi-Alignment and the Future of Strategic Autonomy

Multi-alignment has become one of the most visible features of contemporary Indian foreign policy.

India simultaneously participates in institutions that represent different geopolitical orientations. It is part of BRICS and the SCO while also participating in the Quad and developing closer relationships with Western powers.

Zomuanthanga and Shekhawat describe India's simultaneous engagement with BRICS and IPEF as an example of multi-alignment in a multipolar international system.

The Trump 2.0 period makes this strategy more complicated because major powers increasingly expect clearer strategic choices.

However, India continues to have incentives to preserve flexibility.

Its engagement with the United States provides access to technology, defence cooperation and Indo-Pacific partnerships.

Its relationship with Russia provides defence, energy and diplomatic options.

Its engagement with China is necessary because China is a neighbouring major power and an important economic actor.

Its participation in BRICS and other Global South institutions provides alternative diplomatic platforms.

The strategy can therefore be understood as **diversification of external relationships**.

Nevertheless, multi-alignment has limitations. Maintaining relationships with competing powers requires careful diplomacy. Economic dependence, technological requirements, military needs and trade pressures can reduce the space available for independent choices.

The more intense US-China and Russia-West competition becomes, the more difficult it may become to maintain flexibility.

Therefore, strategic autonomy depends not only on diplomatic skill but also on domestic economic strength, technological capability, military capacity and diversified international partnerships.

10. Discussion and Findings

The analysis produces five major findings.

First, strategic autonomy remains a central principle of Indian foreign policy.

India's foreign policy has changed significantly since the Cold War, but the underlying objective of preserving independent decision-making remains important.

Second, strategic autonomy has shifted from non-alignment toward multi-alignment.

India is no longer primarily defined by distance from military blocs. Instead, it actively participates in multiple strategic and economic partnerships.

Third, Trump 2.0 has increased pressure on India's strategic autonomy.

The United States remains an important strategic partner, but the more transactional character of Trump 2.0 creates tensions concerning trade, technology, Russia and broader foreign-policy priorities. Recent analysis from Carnegie and RSIS highlights this increased uncertainty.

Fourth, Russia remains relevant despite growing Western engagement.

India's continued engagement with Russia demonstrates that closer relations with Washington do not automatically produce alignment against Moscow.

Fifth, China is a major driver of India's strategic calculations.

The post-Galwan environment has strengthened India's security cooperation with the United States and other Indo-Pacific partners, while India continues to use multilateral platforms involving China.

The overall finding is therefore that India's strategic autonomy is **adaptive rather than static**. India does not seek complete independence from all external relationships. Instead, it seeks sufficient flexibility to decide when, where and how to cooperate.

11. Conclusion

India's strategic autonomy has evolved significantly from the non-alignment of the Cold War to the multi-alignment of the twenty-first century. The central objective, however, remains relatively consistent: preserving the freedom to make foreign-policy decisions according to India's national interests.

The Trump 2.0 era has created a more demanding environment for this strategy. The United States remains essential to India's defence modernization, technology development, Indo-Pacific engagement and economic objectives. At the same time, the transactional nature of the Trump administration has generated additional pressure regarding trade, technology and India's relationship with Russia.

Russia continues to occupy an important place in India's strategic calculations because of defence, energy and diplomatic considerations. The relationship is changing because of the Ukraine war and Russia's increasing dependence on China, but India's continued engagement demonstrates that New Delhi does not view its relationship with Washington as requiring automatic alignment against Moscow.

China presents another major challenge. The Galwan crisis transformed India-China relations and encouraged stronger Indian balancing behaviour. Nevertheless, India continues to engage China through bilateral diplomacy and multilateral institutions. This demonstrates that India's China policy combines competition, deterrence, engagement and institutional participation.

The evidence therefore suggests that Trump 2.0 has **not eliminated India's strategic autonomy**. Instead, it has exposed the practical limits and costs of maintaining it. The more transactional the international environment becomes, the more India must diversify

partnerships and strengthen its own capabilities.

Multi-alignment remains an important instrument in this process. Through simultaneous engagement with the United States, Russia, China and multiple international institutions, India seeks to maximize strategic options rather than commit itself permanently to one geopolitical camp.

Ultimately, India's strategic autonomy will depend not simply on diplomatic balancing but also on domestic economic strength, technological capacity, defence capabilities and the ability to diversify international relationships. The Trump 2.0 era therefore represents less a departure from India's strategic autonomy than a significant test of its adaptability.

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