



## India's diplomatic strategy in great power rivalry

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### Abstract

This study explores the essence and key characteristics of India's diplomatic strategy amid the competition between the United States and the China-Russia bloc. As the unipolar order dominated by the United States declines, the world has entered an era of multipolar great-power politics, defined by intense security competition between these blocs. In this shifting global landscape, India has anchored its foreign policy in a strategy of hedging. Rather than aligning exclusively with or balancing against any single major power, India has adopted a clear principle of maintaining balanced relationships with all key players. Taking a neutral stance, India has built a complex web of bilateral and multilateral partnerships with all major powers across political, economic, and security domains. Through this carefully crafted hedging strategy, India preserves its strategic autonomy, ensuring the flexibility needed to navigate diverse diplomatic challenges. At the same time, this approach enables India to maximize its national interests amidst global uncertainties while strengthening its position on the world stage.

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## 1. Introduction

Amid the intense U.S.-China rivalry, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 has pushed the international order into a chaotic era of great power competition. This new phase is characterized by simultaneous U.S.-China hegemonic competition, U.S.-Russia confrontation, and a growing China-Russia alliance. As time progresses, tensions between the liberal bloc, led by the United States, and the authoritarian bloc, spearheaded by China and Russia, continue to escalate. The Biden administration, determined to uphold a rules-based international order and counter the rise of China and Russia, has focused on strengthening international political, economic, military, and security alliances, including NATO, Quad, AUKUS, and the American-Japanese-Korean Trilateral Pact (JAROKUS), as well as initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Chip 4 alliance. In response, China and Russia are leveraging multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates BRICS to counterbalance U.S. influence and, ultimately, challenge the U.S.-led international order. However, many non-great powers face a growing dilemma: the mounting pressure to choose sides in this intensifying rivalry. While many of these nations are part of the U.S.-led liberal international order, they are also deeply intertwined with China and Russia through critical supply chains, export markets, and access to affordable energy. As a result, the fierce competition and confrontation between great powers pose significant strategic challenges for these countries, compelling them to navigate a delicate balancing act in an era of heightened geopolitical tensions.

Against this backdrop, this study examines India's diplomatic strategy within the context of great power competition, delving into the reasons for and historical background behind its strategic choices. As global power rivalries intensify, the role of middle powers like India—often referred to as “swing states”—and their foreign strategies become crucial areas of analysis. These middle powers not only have a significant influence

on shaping the future of international order but also play a key role in mitigating the instability caused by great power competition, potentially stabilizing the global system (Sweijts & Michael, 2023). As of 2024, India is the world's most populous country, with 1.429 billion people, including over 200 million English speakers. It has the world's fifth-largest nominal Gross domestic product GDP and the third-largest GDP by purchasing power parity, establishing it as one of the world's most powerful economies. Additionally, India is a nuclear-armed state, ranking third globally in military spending. Given these factors, India is widely considered to be one of the most likely nations to emerge as a superpower in the near future. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017) has long predicted that India will become the world's second-largest economy by 2050, following China, and Goldman Sachs (2023) forecasts that India will reach this milestone by 2075. Given India's significant regional power and its growing global influence, the country's foreign policy will undoubtedly be a crucial factor in shaping the future distribution of global power and the reconfiguration of the international order. For this reason, the United States, China, and Russia are all striving to deepen their economic, political, military, and security ties with India in an effort to draw the country—long situated in the geopolitical “gray zone”—into their respective spheres of influence. An analysis of India's foreign strategy holds the potential to contribute positively to academic discourse by providing fresh insights and perspectives for many other middle powers that, due to their geopolitical positioning, may find themselves easily ensnared in the maelstrom of great power competition.

While research on India's foreign policy has been extensive, scholarly analysis of its strategy since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 remains notably limited. Furthermore, assessments of the nature of India's diplomatic strategy still remain divided among scholars. Particularly since the rise of Narendra Modi's government in 2014, there has been a growing argument that India's foreign policy has shifted from its traditional non-alignment to a more realist stance (Cho, 2019; Chanwahn Kim, 2018; Li, 2023; Sinha, 2022; Tak, Jun-Ho, & Rak-Young, 2023). This view is grounded in India's growing involvement in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific military alliance, driven by China's expanding influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as ongoing military tensions along the India-China border. However, this study argues that the Modi government's strengthening of security cooperation with the United States does not necessarily signal a fundamental shift in India's traditional non-alignment policy. As the analysis in this study shows, India has consistently maintained this non-alignment stance since its independence.

This study is structured into four chapters. Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical discussions surrounding the hedging strategy. Chapter 3 examines India's diplomacy with major powers—the United States, China, and Russia—through a historical lens, focusing on key events. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes the study with a summary of the findings and closing remarks.

## **2. Hedging Strategy**

The hedging strategy has emerged as a conceptual framework that goes beyond the simplistic dichotomy of balancing and bandwagoning proposed by traditional neorealist alliance theories, capturing the complex range of state strategies that fall between these two approaches. Originating in finance, where it refers to diversifying investments to minimize potential losses from market fluctuations, the concept of hedging gained significant attention in International Relations studies during the 1990s. It echoes the idea of not putting all one's eggs in one basket. Although existing research on the hedging strategy is extensive, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on its definition. For instance, Goh (2006) describes hedging as passive actions taken by states that result in ambiguous signals or behaviors, setting it apart from both balancing and bandwagoning. Meanwhile, Ciorciari (2010) defines it as a strategy of “limited alignment,” aimed at reducing the risk of entrapment in alliances under uncertain security conditions, while allowing states to engage politically and economically with both competing great powers. Chanwahn Kim (2018) defines hedging as a passive strategy facilitated by a multi-process of mixing and merging balancing and bandwagoning, typically adopted by weaker states in situations where the outcomes of great power competition are uncertain, and a stance must be articulated on significant issues. Tan and Soong (2023) define hedging as an “insurance-seeking strategy” employed by middle and smaller states to offset the high uncertainty and risks stemming from intensified great power competition, aiming to avoid alignment with any single side while securing autonomy in policy decisions. Lee (2012) posits that, while balancing and bandwagoning represent alternative strategies that involve sacrificing relations with one specific major power to cooperate with another, hedging serves as a third strategy that avoids the dilemma of choosing between competing great powers, enabling selective cooperation with all major powers from a neutral position while preserving all possible policy options.

The hedging strategy encompasses both the “risk-averse” aspect of balancing and the “profit-maximizing” aspect of bandwagoning (Kuik, 2016). Through this strategy, a state can prepare contingencies (insurance) against worst-case scenarios such as entrapment and abandonment resulting from overly close ties with allies, while simultaneously maximizing its benefits by expanding political and economic exchanges with adversaries. The effectiveness of a robust hedging strategy lies in the principle of “equity,” whereby a state signals its intent to remain neutral between competing great powers, while simultaneously cultivating positive relations with all major powers (Kim, 2024a). In the process of implementing a strategy to mitigate potential risks, various costs are inevitably incurred. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid sending hostile signals to adversaries while ensuring that allies are aware of the potential for shifts in alliance dynamics (Ibid.). This approach

embodies the core principle of “strategic ambiguity” in hedging strategies, which involves leveraging a broad range of alternatives to mitigate or suppress potential risks (Ibid.). In particular, cooperation through multilayered alliances and networks helps mitigate the costs of sacrificing relationships with adversaries, while effectively easing the constraints on autonomy imposed by alliances and the anxieties that can arise as a result (Ibid., 45). In short, by adopting a more ambiguous hedging strategy instead of choosing between balancing or aligning with competing great powers, a state can offset potential long-term risks and maximize its benefits from these powers. Considering these elements, the primary objectives of hedging can be summarized as: (1) maintaining positive relationships with multiple competing great powers simultaneously; (2) enhancing the security of middle and smaller states or mitigating anticipated risks; and (3) preserving diplomatic autonomy to the greatest extent possible during periods of turmoil and uncertainty (Tan & Soong, 2023).

Recent studies consistently show that as uncertainty from great power competition intensifies, middle and smaller states are increasingly adopting hedging strategies (Anwar, 2023; Cha, 2023; Chang, 2023; Choi, 2020; Choo, 2021; Chung, 2020; Ikenberry, 2016; Kao, 2023; S. Kim, 2024b; Kuik, 2024; Tan & Soong, 2023). As the power dynamics between the United States and China evolve and uncertainties around their competition deepen, making definitive choices between balancing and bandwagoning carries significant risks and costs. Consequently, many middle and smaller states are increasingly adopting hedging strategies to mitigate these risks. Hedging is viewed as an effective diplomatic approach, enabling these countries to navigate the dilemmas of entanglement or neglect in alliances with great powers while maximizing their national interests. In essence, as great power rivalries intensify, middle and smaller states are more inclined to adopt a neutral stance—maintaining distance from both camps and pursuing strategic autonomy, much like the non-alignment movement during the Cold War.

### **3. India’s Foreign Policy toward the United States, China, and Russia**

The core tenet that has long defined India’s foreign policy is its commitment to non-alignment. Non-alignment refers to the policy pursued by countries seeking an independent foreign policy within the bipolar international system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. This policy is rooted in the principles of peace, friendship, and cooperation, aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty, and encompasses a rejection of military alliances with great powers and the provision of military bases (Paek, 2021). After gaining independence from Britain on August 15, 1947, India, under its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted non-alignment as the foundation of its foreign policy, opposing imperialism, rejecting military alliances, promoting peaceful conflict resolution, and striving to build friendly relations with all nations.

India’s decision to adopt a non-aligned foreign policy after independence is deeply rooted in strong anti-imperialist, anti-Western, and anti-colonial sentiments born from its long colonial experience (Ibid., 224). Under approximately 190 years of British colonial rule, India lost its identity as an autonomous actor, which became a decisive factor in fostering a profound aversion to imperialism and led the nation to prioritize the preservation of its sovereignty and independence without interference from great powers as a core policy objective. India’s traditional culture of tolerance and peace, dating back to ancient Indian civilization and Mahatma Gandhi’s advocacy of non-violence, also had a significant impact on the formation of its non-alignment policy (Ko, 1996). India’s geopolitical location, sharing borders with two communist powers—Soviet Union and China—also significantly contributes to its pursuit of a non-aligned foreign policy (Ibid.). In the event of a conflict between the communist bloc and the Western bloc, India, as a neighboring country, would be susceptible to immediate repercussions and risks being drawn into the conflict. Moreover, India’s primary priorities as a newly independent nation were economic development and national integration. To avoid being drawn into the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union—an entanglement that could lead to excessive military expenditure or unnecessary involvement in conflicts between the great powers—India chose to pursue a non-aligned foreign policy.

The core objective of India’s non-aligned foreign policy is to uphold strategic autonomy and an independent foreign policy stance. Prime Minister Nehru firmly believed that India must maintain an independent foreign policy on global issues, and that no matter how powerful a nation may be, India should never be used or exploited by it. Notably, his assertion that “We do not intend to be the playthings of others” reflects India’s strong commitment to autonomous diplomacy, symbolizing the nation’s determination to forge its own path and respond independently to international issues rather than becoming a tool of great powers (Prasad, 1990). Additionally, as he stated in his 1948 address to the Constituent Assembly, “It is not a wise policy to put all your eggs in one basket,” India has consistently pursued a diplomatic strategy aimed at maintaining balanced relations with all major powers (Chand, 1993).

When India gained independence from Britain in 1947, the Soviet Union, a victor of World War II, emerged as the leader of the Second World, while the Chinese Communist Party, victorious in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, was incorporated into this bloc. Although the United States had fought alongside the Soviet Union as allies against Nazi Germany during World War II, it shifted its stance in 1947 by adopting a policy of containment toward the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union) USSR, proclaiming the Truman Doctrine in response to the expanding Soviet influence worldwide. Consequently, the international order was transitioning into a Cold War structure characterized by an ideological confrontation between the

capitalist bloc led by the United States and the socialist bloc centered around the Soviet Union. In this context, India adopted a non-aligned foreign policy, steadfastly maintaining a neutral stance that neither favored the United States nor the Soviet Union.

Immediately after India's independence, the Soviet Union's policy toward India was marked by notable hostility. The Soviet leader Joseph Stalin viewed India as a nation still aligned with the West and criticized the policies of the Indian government, even going so far as to encourage the Indian Communist Party to oppose it (Ibid.). This hostile diplomatic stance from the USSR ultimately drove India further toward the West, culminating in India's condemnation of Soviet expansionism during the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference held in October 1948. However, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, while establishing Asia's first democracy politically, followed the Soviet model economically by nationalizing major industries and pursuing a Soviet-style approach to economic development. Against this backdrop, after Nikita Khrushchev became the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1953, India and the Soviet Union developed a close economic relationship that grew into a strong and strategic alliance as the Cold War escalated.

After the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, India sought to deepen its relationship with the Soviet Union to counterbalance China and Pakistan, receiving substantial military equipment and financial aid in the process. Against this backdrop, both nations supported each other, adopting similar stances on contentious international issues. The Soviet Union rejected United Nations UN Security Council resolutions calling for international intervention in Kashmir, advocating instead for resolution through negotiations between India and Pakistan, while India abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, thereby avoiding open criticism of the Soviet Union. In this manner, India utilized its alliance with the Soviet Union as a leverage against China and Pakistan, while the Soviet Union viewed India as a counterbalance to American and Chinese dominance in Asia. In August 1971, India and the Soviet Union signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, marking a pivotal moment in their bilateral relations. Later that year, during the Third Indo-Pakistani War, India's victory was significantly supported by Soviet military and economic assistance, further strengthening the alliance. As Pakistan faced imminent defeat, the United States deployed the United States Ship USS Enterprise from the Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal in an effort to pressure India. However, intervention by the Soviet Pacific Fleet enabled India to secure its position and ultimately achieve victory. In 1974, India conducted its first nuclear test in Pokhran, prompting the United States to impose military and economic sanctions. In contrast, the Soviet Union chose to overlook the event, further deepening military and economic ties between the two nations throughout the Cold War. This alignment was reinforced in 1980 when India participated in the Moscow Olympics, defying a boycott by most Western countries in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Following India's independence, India and China initially maintained a cordial relationship, grounded in their shared experiences of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles. However, this relationship began to deteriorate in 1956 when it was revealed that China had been constructing a highway linking Tibet and Xinjiang through Aksai Chin, a disputed region along the India-China border. India upheld the McMahon Line as its border, based on the Simla Convention during British colonial rule, but China refused to recognize this boundary. Tensions escalated and culminated in the Sino-Indian War on October 20, 1962, when China launched a preemptive attack on Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. After 31 days of intense conflict, China emerged victorious. Following the war, border clashes between the two countries continued intermittently. During this period, China also supported Pakistan in the Second and Third Indo-Pakistani Wars in 1965 and 1971. In the 1970s, China sought to counter Soviet influence by normalizing relations with the United States. As a result, the India-China relationship shifted from its early cooperation to a deeply hostile one, driven by the 1962 Sino-Indian War and China's support for Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani conflicts.

The relationship between India and the United States remained notably lukewarm throughout the Cold War. Although diplomatic ties were established shortly after India's independence, Prime Minister Nehru's non-alignment and neutral stance created discomfort among U.S. policymakers, who were deeply entrenched in the binary thinking characteristic of early Cold War politics. The already strained relations further deteriorated in the 1950s, particularly when India recognized the People's Republic of China in 1950 and the United States facilitated Pakistan's entry into the Central Treaty Organization in 1954. Moreover, while the United States strengthened its military agreements with Asian nations through mutual defense treaties with the Philippines and Japan in 1951 and the Mutual Defense Agreement with Pakistan in 1954, Prime Minister Nehru strongly opposed these military pacts. As mentioned earlier, following the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, India began strengthening its ties with the Soviet Union to counterbalance China and Pakistan, which significantly strained India-U.S. relations. Following the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, the United States imposed an arms embargo on India, and even after the embargo was lifted in 1967, the United States maintained a lukewarm stance toward arms sales to India. In the late 1960s, as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi openly condemned U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and expressed support for the Viet Cong, President Lyndon Johnson reconsidered the monthly food aid that had been routinely provided to India.

As India signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971—at a time when the latter was embroiled in conflict with China—and began importing large quantities of arms from the Soviets, the United States viewed Pakistan as a counterbalance to the pro-Soviet India, subsequently

providing financial assistance and advanced weaponry to Pakistan while turning a blind eye to its training of terrorists and jihadists to reclaim Kashmir. As the defeat of Pakistan became inevitable during the Third Indo-Pakistani War, which erupted in December 1971, the United States deployed its largest aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise, to the Bay of Bengal in an attempt to intimidate India. Moreover, as India established itself as a nuclear power, it experienced severe friction with the United States, further deteriorating relations between the two countries. Following India's first nuclear test in Pokhran in 1974, the United States imposed military and economic sanctions on India. When India successfully conducted additional nuclear tests in 1976, establishing itself as a nuclear weapons state despite U.S. sanctions, the United States imposed further sanctions on India while turning a blind eye to Pakistan's nuclear armament. During the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, the United States actively supported Pakistan, facilitating the rise of pro-Pakistani factions in Afghanistan, which ultimately culminated in the current Taliban government. Thus, the India-U.S. relationship was marked by significant hostility, influenced by the strong U.S.-Pakistan alliance and the cordial India-Soviet partnership. This diplomatic tension substantially constrained cooperation between India and the United States, preventing the two nations from forging a closer relationship during the Cold War.

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, India shifted from its policy of limited cooperation with major powers to the "Look East Policy," aiming to diversify its diplomatic engagements by focusing on the rapidly growing economies of East and Southeast Asia. With the emergence of a U.S.-led unipolar world order characterized by liberal globalization, India's foreign policy increasingly shifted its focus from political to economic priorities, underscoring the growing significance of economic diplomacy. Like other emerging nations, India began emphasizing economic objectives such as growth and energy security in its foreign relations. This shift became particularly pronounced in the late 1990s, following the replacement of the Indian National Congress (INC) by a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition, which actively sought to strengthen ties with the United States and Western powers.

In the early 2000s, the United States began transitioning from its historically adversarial stance toward India to fostering stronger economic and security partnerships, leading to a rapid improvement in bilateral relations. This change marked a departure from nearly five decades of strained relations since India's independence in 1947. The shift in U.S. policy was largely driven by a neorealist strategy to counterbalance China's rapid rise and maintain regional stability in Asia. India's geographic position in the Indo-Pacific region and its growing naval capabilities positioned it as a critical partner for the United States in maintaining a balance of power against China. Recognizing these strategic advantages, the United States began integrating India into its broader regional strategy, emphasizing military cooperation and supporting India's emergence as a global power. This strategic partnership reflects the United States' efforts to sustain its dominance in the region while countering China's influence (Li, 2023).

In 2000, President Clinton made an official visit to India and lifted U.S. sanctions imposed after India's 1998 nuclear tests, while the Bush administration established a strategic partnership with India in 2001 and signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement in 2002. In 2005, the United States further solidified its commitment to security cooperation with India by entering into a ten-year defense framework agreement (Ibid.). In March 2006, President Bush visited India and signed a landmark nuclear cooperation agreement with the Indian government, allowing International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of India's nuclear facilities in exchange for U.S. nuclear technology and fuel. In November 2010, President Obama visited India, granting it nuclear power status and supporting its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The following year, he elevated U.S.-India relations to the level of a global strategic partnership. In January 2015, President Obama visited India again for a summit with Prime Minister Modi, during which he unveiled the India-U.S. Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean, expressing hope that India would take on a larger role in the region. In November 2017, President Trump announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, placing India at the heart of the United States' new Asian strategy and designating it as an indispensable component of the U.S. security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. In March 2021, President Biden elevated the Quad meetings from a ministerial level to a summit level, and later that September, he held a one-on-one meeting with Prime Minister Modi, resulting in the release of the U.S.-India Joint Leaders' Statement: A Partnership for Global Good. In 2022, Biden included India in the IPEF, and in January 2023, the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) was launched, aimed at deepening technological and security collaboration between the two nations. Along with these efforts, the United States has also been strengthening its strategy to position India as a new supply chain hub and consumer market to replace China.

The military and strategic partnership between India and the United States began to strengthen in earnest after the Modi government took office in May 2014. The Modi government has aggressively pursued stronger military cooperation with the United States, culminating in the signing of three key military cooperation agreements: the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016, the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) in September 2018, and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA) in October 2020. The Modi government has also actively participated as a key member of the Quad, as well as in the Indo-Pacific strategy established under the Trump administration. This proactive diplomatic engagement with the United States has resulted in large-scale joint military exercises conducted by the Indian and U.S. armed forces.

Despite its military cooperation with the United States, India has maintained a cautious stance toward anti-China coalitions, feeling significant pressure from the containment-oriented nature of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad. As a result, India has carefully calibrated its level of participation in these security initiatives. When the United States and Japan proposed the Indo-Pacific framework in 2016 and 2017 to counter China's influence in the South China Sea, India, showing reluctance to fully align with the U.S.-led initiative, played a key role in including the term "open" in the framework and remained cautious about the Quad's evolution into a formal security alliance (Kim, 2021). At the Asia Security Conference in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi emphasized that the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad were not exclusive frameworks targeting specific countries, but rather open and inclusive initiatives, while also stating that India would not be bound by any alliances. This can be interpreted as a public rejection of overtly joining U.S.-led security cooperation aimed at containing China.

However, following the 2020 India-China border clash and China's expanding influence in Pakistan and the Indian Ocean, India reassessed its stance on the Quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy, which it had previously approached cautiously to avoid provoking China. China has been advancing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, launched in 2013 as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This ambitious endeavor involves the construction of extensive infrastructure, including roads, railways, pipelines, and fiber optic cables, spanning approximately 3,000 kilometers from Kashgar to Gwadar port. The CPEC is the most expensive project of the BRI, but it offers China a crucial strategic advantage by providing direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the U.S. Navy's presence through its connection with Pakistan. However, for India, the corridor poses a significant security threat as it passes through the disputed Kashmir region and allows China to establish a naval base at the Gwadar port, potentially enhancing its military operations in the Indian Ocean.

Moreover, Since the early 21st century, China has been steadily seeking to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean, with one key motivation being the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait. This narrow waterway, stretching 930 kilometers between the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia's Sumatra Island, connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and serves as a vital maritime passage for Asia's major economies. Approximately 80% of China's oil imports from the Middle East pass through the Strait. However, the U.S. Seventh Fleet essentially controls this chokepoint, posing a significant concern for China. In the event of diplomatic tensions or military conflict between the United States and China, a blockade of the Malacca Strait by the United States could deliver a devastating blow to China's economy. In response to this strategic challenge, China has developed the "String of Pearls" strategy, which involves establishing a network of naval bases across key locations, including Sihanoukville in Cambodia, Sittwe in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, and Djibouti in northeastern Africa. The problem lies in the fact that this network not only encircles India geographically but also includes several smaller South Asian nations. Traditionally, India has considered the Indian Ocean, particularly South Asia, as its sphere of influence. Countries in the region, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, along with maritime neighbors like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mauritius, have long been part of India's strategic domain, dating back to the colonial era when the region was often referred to as the "Indian Subcontinent." Consequently, China's aggressive approach to the Indian Ocean and South Asia is seen by India as a direct challenge to its regional dominance, posing a serious threat to both its maritime activities and trade.

China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, coupled with the ongoing border clashes between India and China, has significantly heightened threat perceptions among Indians, prompting India to more actively engage in anti-China military alliances with the United States (Kronstadt, 2022). This shift was particularly marked by the deadly skirmish in June 2020 in the Galwan Valley of the Aksai Chin region, where approximately 600 Indian and Chinese soldiers, armed with sticks, clubs, and rocks, clashed, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. This incident marked the first violent clash with casualties since 1975, sharply heightening public fears among Indians. A survey conducted by *India Today* (2020) in July 2020, a month after the border clash, revealed that 84% of respondents did not trust China, with 59% believing that India should engage in war with China to resolve ongoing border tensions. In a survey conducted by the Observer Research Foundation in August 2021, which targeted over 2,000 individuals aged 18 to 35 across 14 cities in India, China was identified as the most distrustful country, with 77% of respondents lacking confidence in it, while concerns about the border dispute with China (52%) were greater than those regarding the dispute with Pakistan (49%) (*Times of India*, 2021).

Following the border clash in June 2020, India took a series of aggressive steps to reduce its trade and investment ties with China. The Indian government canceled 4G and 5G technology contracts with Huawei and Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment ZTE, imposed restrictions on Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) and visa issuance, and tightly limited the involvement of Chinese companies in government and state-owned enterprise procurement. Additionally, India banned 267 Chinese mobile apps, including TikTok, WeChat, and Meitu, and removed Chinese from its list of foreign language subjects. Furthermore, in July 2020, one month after the border clash, Indian and U.S. forces conducted joint military operations in the Indian Ocean (Lo & Liu, 2020). Subsequently, in October 2020, India and the United States signed the BECA, further enhancing their defense collaboration. Notably, in November 2020, India invited Australia to participate in the Malabar naval exercises for the first time in 15 years, signaling a shift toward deeper security

cooperation among Quad member countries. In February 2021, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the annual Indo-U.S. joint military exercise, Yudh Abhyas, was conducted for two weeks in Rajasthan, India. In March 2021, Prime Minister Modi held a virtual summit with the leaders of the Quad member countries, marking the first meeting of the Quad heads of state since the foreign ministers' meetings held in September 2019, October 2020, and February 2021. In April 2021, the Indian Navy participated in the "La Perouse" maritime joint exercise in the Bay of Bengal, which was led by Quad member countries and France (Kim, 2021). In November 2022, Indian and U.S. forces conducted the Yudh Abhyas joint military exercise in Auri, Uttarakhand, located just 100 kilometers from the Line of Actual Control between India and China. Essentially, India's heightened perception of the China threat, following the 2020 border clash and China's ongoing expansion into South Asia and the Indian Ocean, appears to have aligned with the United States' strategic objective of containing China, leading to a convergence of interests between the two nations (Li, 2023).

However, while engaging in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific military alliance to counter China, India has expressed caution about its growing military cooperation with the U.S. being seen as a complete "anti-China alliance." At the same time, India has consistently signaled that both its security cooperation with the United States and its stance on China are flexible, reflecting a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy. Traditionally opposed to diplomatically isolating any nation, India—while recognizing the growing threat posed by China's rise—has opted for a more open and flexible approach. Rather than fully aligning itself with an anti-China bloc alongside the United States, India has sought to maintain a collaborative stance that allows for greater strategic autonomy. For example, even after the border clash with China in June 2020, India continued joint military exercises and counterterrorism training with China, and did not rule out trilateral cooperation with both China and Russia. It participated in meetings of the foreign ministers of China, Russia, and India in September 2020 and again in November 2021, where they discussed ways to enhance collaboration among the three nations. In March 2022, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar held a bilateral meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in New Delhi. In September of that year, India demonstrated its continued multilateral military cooperation by participating in Russia-led military exercises known as *Vostok 2022*, where Indian troops trained alongside Chinese forces.

Subsequently, on August 16, 2023, during the 19th round of commander-level talks, the defense ministries of India and China announced that they had engaged in constructive and in-depth discussions regarding the resolution of issues along the Line of Actual Control, agreeing to expedite efforts to resolve border disputes. On August 24, 2023, during the BRICS summit in South Africa, Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping held a bilateral meeting, agreeing to collaborate on maintaining peace and stability in their border regions. At the BRICS summit held in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024, Prime Minister Modi met with President Xi to stress the importance of improved communication and cooperation between India and China. Modi highlighted that resolving differences and supporting each other's development objectives are crucial for fostering global peace (India Today, 2024). Before the summit, the two nations achieved a significant milestone by signing an agreement to deploy border security forces, marking a major step toward resolving their four-year-long border dispute and strengthening bilateral ties. In November 2024, during the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a high-level meeting. Their discussions focused on border issues, the trajectory of bilateral relations, and the broader international context influencing these matters.

Additionally, in February 2023, Jaishankar signaled a renewed commitment to economic cooperation with China (The Economic Times, 2023). In July 2024, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman further expressed the Indian government's willingness to expand direct investment from China, which had been restricted since the border conflict in 2020 (Reuters, 2024). These conciliatory gestures from the Indian government toward China can be viewed as a pragmatic policy grounded in economic interests. China's significance and role in India's economic growth and technological innovation remain substantial. Since the market liberalization in the 1990s, India and China have developed an inseparable trade partnership, with China currently being India's largest source of imports. Over the past 15 years, China's share of India's imports of key manufactured goods, such as telecommunications, machinery, and electronics, has surged from 21% to 30%, indicating India's significant reliance on China across various industries (The Hindu, 2024). Notably, for India, the most populous country in the world, affordable consumer goods imported from China are indispensable. In the first quarter of the 2024 fiscal year, Chinese smartphones captured a remarkable 75% market share in India, reflecting the price-sensitive nature of Indian consumers who consistently favor affordable products with advanced specifications (Kar, 2024). Consequently, despite the tensions following the border clashes in 2020, the total trade volume between the two countries in 2021 surged by 43.3% compared to 2020, reaching \$125.66 billion (Business Standard, 2022).

Given these factors, it is evident that India's primary objective is to promote cooperation for mutual economic benefit through peaceful coexistence with China, rather than pursuing a full-scale military alliance with the United States to contain China (Mukherjee, 2020). Despite concerns over China's rise, India does not view China as an immediate security threat. Instead, it recognizes China as an essential regional actor that must be engaged for global problem-solving and for India's prosperity (Tan & Soong, 2023). Moreover, India has actively participated as a key member in China-led initiatives such as BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank (AIIB), and the SCO. India is also highly engaged in discussions surrounding the development of a new currency and payment system aimed at reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar, particularly within the context of BRICS. This trend is further reinforced by the shared objective of India and China to establish a multipolar international order, driven by ongoing skepticism toward U.S. hegemony and a desire to move away from a U.S.-led unipolar system. In this way, India has consistently signaled its intention to avoid taking sides in the U.S.-China competition, choosing instead to maintain selective cooperation with both powers. This approach has enabled India to maximize the effectiveness of its hedging strategy, while expanding its diplomatic flexibility and independence on the global stage.

India's hedging strategy, which seeks to maintain balanced relations without fully aligning with any particular major power amidst the competition among great powers, has become more pronounced since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Following the outbreak of the war, the United States and its Western allies declared Russia to be "the most serious and direct threat to allied security" (NATO, 2022), imposing sweeping, multi-sectoral economic sanctions to weaken Russia's war capabilities while providing robust military support to Ukraine. Since the outbreak of the war, Western countries, including the United States, Britain, Switzerland, the European Union (EU), Australia, Canada, and Japan, have imposed a total of 16,500 sanctions on Russia, which include export and financial sanctions, as well as restrictions on imports of key Russian products like oil and natural gas (BBC News, 2024). Since the outbreak of the war, the U.S. government has provided approximately \$55.3 billion in military aid to Ukraine, bringing the total to \$113.4 billion when combined with the \$58.1 billion in military assistance given between Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the start of the 2022 war (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Additionally, the United States and its Western allies have frozen nearly \$300 billion in Russian overseas assets, pushing forward plans to use the returns from these frozen assets as collateral for loans to Ukraine (Shalal, 2024).

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, several Western allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, sent delegations to India in an attempt to gain its support. However, India maintained a firm neutral stance, abstaining from a series of UN votes on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including those in the Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council. In the Quad summit statement in March 2022, India also prevented any direct condemnation of Russia. Similarly, when the massacre of hundreds of Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces in Bucha occurred in April 2022, India refrained from condemning Russia.

Furthermore, while leading global powers sought to curtail their trade relations with Russia, India adopted a different course, significantly expanding its imports. In particular, India dramatically increased its purchases of Russian crude oil, which had sharply declined in price due to Western sanctions on Russian energy exports. In March 2022, India also established a rupee-ruble trade agreement with Russia to bypass the SWIFT payment system. Subsequently, India profited substantially by importing Russian crude oil at discounted prices through the rupee-ruble payment system and then re-exporting it at higher prices. Between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022, India imported \$9.86 billion worth of crude oil from Russia; however, from April 2022 to January 2023, this figure surged by 384% compared to the previous year, reaching \$37.31 billion (The Indian Express, 2023). Since the implementation of the oil price cap in December 2022, over one-third of India's oil product exports to G7-led coalition countries that have sanctioned Russia have been derived from Russian crude oil, totaling approximately EUR 6.16 billion (USD 6.65 billion) (The Economic Times, 2024). In essence, India has transformed geopolitical volatility into a geoeconomic opportunity, reaping substantial profits from oil trade between the West and Russia. In addition, it has been expanding its imports of relatively low-priced Russian edible oil and fertilizers, while also significantly exporting sensitive technologies such as microchips, circuits, and machine tools to Russia (Bloomberg, 2024). Meanwhile, in response to Western criticism of India's refusal to join sanctions against Russia, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar defended the country's stance, pointing out that the EU had made exceptions for Russian oil imports and imposed no sanctions on natural gas. He also noted that between February 24 and November 17, 2022, the EU had imported six times more Russian oil than India, and asserted that India would tailor its policies to its own needs and circumstances (Bhasin, 2022).

India also took part in the large-scale *Vostok 2022* military exercises led by Russia in September 2022, despite explicit warnings from the United States. Furthermore, during a visit to Moscow in November 2022, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar held a joint press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, openly praising Russia as "a steady and time-tested partner" and publicly declaring India's intention to continue importing Russian crude oil for its economic interests (The Times of India, 2022). Additionally, in September 2023, India hosted the 18th G-20 summit and played a crucial role in ensuring that a pro-Russia leaders' declaration regarding the Russia-Ukraine war was adopted. In November of that year, the Indian Navy conducted a two-day joint naval exercise (INDRA Exercise) in the Bay of Bengal alongside the Russian Navy. Notably, this exercise coincided with concurrent military drills conducted by the Indian Army in Meghalaya in collaboration with U.S. Army Special Forces (Deshpande, 2023). In December of the same year, Jaishankar visited Moscow again, where he met with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. During the visit, he highlighted the unprecedented trade volume between India and Russia and reaffirmed his commitment to strengthening bilateral military and economic cooperation, including agreements on joint arms production and investment (Tamkin, 2023). In March 2024, India also began discussions on a free trade



agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia (Chaudhury, 2024).

In July 2024, following the confirmation of his third term, Prime Minister Modi made an official visit to Russia as his first overseas destination, where he held the 22nd India-Russia Summit with President Putin. During this meeting, he emphasized the strengthening of the special and friendly partnership between India and Russia amid ongoing geopolitical instability, and issued a joint statement regarding the development of strategic areas of economic cooperation (Pathi, 2024). Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia holds significant diplomatic importance, as it not only bolstered President Putin's standing in the face of international isolation but also garnered greater support for India. Furthermore, Modi's trip coincided with the NATO Summit in Washington, D.C., which commemorated the 75th anniversary of its founding. This effectively illustrates that his foreign policy in his third term is characterized by strategic autonomy, aiming to maintain a balance between the United States and Russia while thoroughly pursuing India's national interests (Ganguly, 2024). At the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024, Prime Minister Modi met with President Putin again, expressing gratitude for Putin's "strong friendship" toward India and praising the "special and privileged strategic partnership" between Russia and India (France, 2024). In short, Russia remains a key strategic partner for India, not only in defense and energy but also in counterbalancing China. As a result, India continues to maintain a friendly relationship with Russia, adhering to its tradition of non-alignment, just as it did during the Cold War, despite opposition from the United States.

From the perspective of the Biden administration, which aimed to severely undermine Russia's finances through sweeping international sanctions, India's hedging strategy has inevitably been a source of disappointment (Kronstadt, 2022). Initially, the Biden administration anticipated that India, as the world's largest democracy, would actively participate in condemning Russia and joining sanctions against it. In recent years, the U.S. government has pledged to support India's membership in various international organizations and assist its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, anticipating that India will actively participate as a key player in the U.S. strategy to counter China. The United States, viewing India as a key defense partner, has signed several bilateral defense agreements, and India's annual participation in Quad joint military exercises with the United States, Australia, and Japan has further fueled American aspirations for an Indo-Pacific version of NATO. As a result, President Biden publicly expressed frustration on March 21, 2022, noting that India among the Quad member countries was "somewhat shaky" in acting against Russia (Das, 2022). On March 31, 2022, the U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh visited New Delhi and warned that any country, including India, attempting to establish payment mechanisms to conduct transactions through the Russian central bank or to circumvent U.S. sanctions against Russia would face "consequences" (Dutton, 2022). A week later, on April 6, Brian Deese, the White House's top economic advisor, also warned that if India were to pursue a "more explicit strategic alignment" with Russia, the repercussions would be "significant and long-term" (Global Times, 2022).

Under the U.S. sanctions regime governing secondary boycotts, India, as a major importer of Russian oil, could potentially become a target for American sanctions. However, aside from expressing rhetorical dissatisfaction, the United States has refrained from imposing direct sanctions or retaliatory measures on India. This reluctance highlights the structural dilemma it faces in its Indo-Pacific strategy. From Washington's perspective, India is an indispensable partner in its strategy to contain China, which it views as a more formidable competitor than Russia. India occupies a unique geopolitical position as the only country that is a member of both the U.S.-led Quad, aimed at containing China, and the China- and Russia-led SCO and BRICS. If the United States were to impose sweeping sanctions on India, thereby driving the emerging economic powerhouse and nuclear-armed military giant closer to China, the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region and the situation for regional allies would deteriorate significantly. Thus, for the United States, the risks of alienating India are far too great. This dilemma highlights India's increasingly significant and independent role within the triad of the global geopolitical order—comprising the United States, China, and Russia. Illustrating this point, the United States explored a plan to provide India with \$500 million in military financing shortly after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, aiming to reduce India's dependence on Russian weaponry (Hindustan Times, 2022). In June 2023, President Biden warmly welcomed Prime Minister Modi to the White House, despite India's refusal to adhere to the U.S.-led sanctions against Russia. This situation starkly illustrates the U.S. government's dilemma: while frustrated by India's lukewarm response to sanctions against Russia, it must also consider the strategic value of India in countering China.

In summary, India's independent and pragmatic diplomatic approach—maintaining engagement with Russia as a strategic partner despite U.S. pressure since the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war—clearly demonstrates that its longstanding tradition of non-alignment with major powers remains fundamentally unchanged. India's diplomatic strategy, marked by maintaining neutrality and fostering multilayered cooperation with all major powers rather than aligning with any single bloc, embodies a typical hedging strategy. India has historically pursued a non-aligned foreign policy that prioritizes strategic autonomy and the pursuit of pragmatic interests, a stance it maintained even during the Cold War. This commitment to neutrality was grounded in the belief that only by avoiding entanglement in great power rivalries could India preserve its independence and focus on fostering economic development. Although India maintained a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it was careful to avoid being constrained by this alliance. As a result, it occasionally clashed with the Soviet Union on key national issues, underscoring its commitment to

strategic autonomy (Kim, 2020). Even today, India's policymakers firmly believe that the central objective of India's foreign policy is to safeguard its strategic autonomy while maintaining friendly relations with all countries (Kim, 2021). In his 2020 book *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar (2020) highlights India's commitment to maintaining strategic autonomy in an evolving global landscape. His focus is on ensuring that India doesn't become overly dependent on external powers or alliances that could limit its independence in decision-making. He advocates for a balanced approach that involves engaging key global players—such as the United States, China, Russia, Europe, and Japan—while keeping India's strategic goals and priorities at the forefront. His perspective stresses the importance of pursuing national interests without adhering to externally defined norms or constraints.

#### 4. Conclusion

A new era of multipolar great-power politics is emerging, marked by intense security competition between the United States and the China-Russia bloc. In this shifting global landscape, India remains steadfast in its commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy, preserving its strategic autonomy while actively pursuing its national interests, as it did during the Cold War. While India engages in U.S.-led Indo-Pacific initiatives like the Quad and the IPEF, it simultaneously strengthens ties with China-led institutions, such as BRICS, the New Development Bank, the AIIB, and the SCO. This allows India to balance its diplomacy between major powers. Additionally, India maintains close defense and energy relations with Russia. Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, India has refrained from participating in U.S. sanctions, adopting a neutral stance while securing discounted Russian energy, positioning itself as a key beneficiary in the ongoing great power competition.

India's distinctive diplomatic approach, often challenging the international community's predictions about its foreign policy direction, serves as a clear example of the hedging strategy. At its core, hedging involves avoiding alignment with any single bloc, instead fostering broad cooperation with all major powers. This approach allows India to maintain diplomatic flexibility and autonomy amid global uncertainties, while advancing its national interests. Through this strategy, India has navigated the complexities of today's great power rivalry, securing both strategic independence and the flexibility to address diverse challenges, all while maximizing its national interests.

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