

Strategy For India in a New Era: Working in Concert with the Middle Powers

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Summary

Indian foreign policy is often defined by its quest for strategic autonomy. Given the current trends in global geopolitics, marked by intensifying great power rivalry between the United States and China, as well as the Russian overstretch in Ukraine, India can shore up its strategic autonomy by reducing its dependence on Russia and working more closely with middle powers such as France, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and South Korea. This brief outlines ways in which India can do so and makes a case for it to define a national security strategy for itself.

Indian foreign policy mavens often define its goal to be a quest for ‘strategic autonomy’ within a global context that ideally ought to be ‘multipolar’. The best means for India to get there is to adopt a strategy of ‘multi-alignment’. New Delhi’s neutrality in the event of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is held to be an instance of such ‘multi-alignment’.

The ongoing tectonic shifts in global geopolitics are, however, already bringing about a multipolar world in ways that are confounding for New Delhi and may prove to be a case of being careful for what it wishes. For instance, much to India’s dismay, the United States was forced to pull out of Afghanistan – a clear demonstration that [the world has indeed become multipolar](#).

Moreover, China’s rise as a rival to the US has brought heightened geopolitical rivalry to India’s doorstep – the most prominent manifestation of which is the confrontation with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army along the Himalayan land border with China. [The confrontation has persisted](#) since the Galwan clashes in June 2020, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed.

In a sense, the pursuit of strategic autonomy in the international sphere is hardly unique to India: it defines all middle and big powers as they are not – or seek not to be – heavily reliant on other powers (small powers may not have this option and have to bandwagon with the bigger powers). Strategic autonomy needs to be balanced against other ends as well, such as when states cooperate to pursue a mutual interest, even if that entails partially giving up national sovereignty. India does not have a clear doctrine in this regard. To phrase it in another way, there is no real answer to the question: strategic autonomy to do what? And what is the path to achieving this objective once it has been set out? [Former Army Chief General M M Naravane](#) recently pointed out New Delhi’s failure to articulate a national security strategy that lays down long-term national and geopolitical objectives.

India’s silence in the face of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been linked to its [heavy reliance on Russian armaments](#). However, this reflects a limitation of India’s strategic

autonomy. If push comes to shove and Moscow must choose between Beijing and New Delhi, there ought to be little doubt in India's mind the side Moscow will choose. China has the markets, technology and capital that Russia covets, far more than India. Beijing and Moscow are also closely bonded ideologically.

To square, this strategic dilemma, India has little option but to pursue a preferential strategic partnership with the US, as well as with other middle powers broadly aligned with it. Today's geopolitical churn does not just entail heightened risk for India; it also brings enhanced opportunities. Along with the US, many of its partners, such as the European Union, the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Australia, Canada, Holland and South Korea, are also articulating their own Indo-Pacific strategies, displacing earlier notions of the Asia-Pacific where China was the geopolitical centre of gravity. This is an opportunity India cannot let go of.

India's military dependence on Moscow curtails its strategic autonomy, because if it comes to fighting a border war, Moscow may not be willing (because of Chinese pressure) or be able (because of its requirements in Ukraine as well as Western sanctions on it) to supply India with the weapons it needs. Despite Moscow declaring a "no limits" alliance with Beijing, [New Delhi "bites its tongue"](#) when it comes to criticising even the worst transgressions of the international order by Moscow, as strategic analyst C Raja Mohan puts it. This amounts to foreclosure of India's options, to open up, which India must cultivate relations not just with big powers such as the US but also a range of middle powers broadly aligned to it such as France, Japan, the UK, Australia, Germany and South Korea.

India must conclude a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union. The interim Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, signed with Australia last year, should be broadened into a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, boosting the sourcing of raw materials, investments, merchandise and service exports, and technology cooperation for Indian industry. India should work hard to attract global supply chains that want to diversify out of China by offering logistics and support, rationalising its tariff policies and ensuring they remain stable and predictable thereafter, and by taking forward the [Supply Chain Resilience Initiative](#), launched with Japan and Australia in April 2021.

India can also diversify its defence partnerships by looking to South Korea, which has a vibrant and burgeoning arms industry supplying high-end military kits such as battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled howitzers, missiles and fighter jets to several countries. South Korea offers high-performance weaponry and delivers rapidly on orders at relatively affordable cost, as well as customisation, co-development and co-production deals – which are not easily available from the US. In 2022, South Korea concluded US\$12.4 billion (S\$16.5 billion) worth of defence deals with Poland which, like India, is attempting to move away from legacy weapons systems obtained from Moscow.

New Delhi cannot overlook linkages between developments in the Indo-Pacific and the European theatre, including lessons that Beijing might draw from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It can adopt several steps to address the changed geopolitical situation, including greater concordance with a range of middle powers broadly aligned with the West. The

West, too, needs to be aware of India's strategic dilemma, as well as potential, and work to facilitate its rise.

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