



India's Strategic Autonomy and the Politics of Distance from the West

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Summary

The idea of 'strategic autonomy' is widely seen as the essential ingredient of India's foreign policy. It is invoked across academia, think tanks and the political class as the main driver for New Delhi's choices on a variety of international issues. This paper traces the origin of strategic autonomy to the middle of the 2000s and sees it as a defensive formula devised to protect India's freedom of action amid growing ties with the United States.

Introduction

The public discourse as well as academic debates on Indian foreign policy put the greatest emphasis on the notion of 'strategic autonomy' as the essential shaper of India's post-Cold War foreign policy. It is invoked continually to justify the decisions by the Indian government on issues ranging from the purchase of Russian weapons and oil and question India's agreements with the US from defence to trade and technology. However, the ubiquity of strategic autonomy in the contemporary discourse obscures the structural element.

In terms of semantics, autonomy is always autonomy *from* something; but that object is rarely specified in the Indian foreign policy discourse. What is missing in the definition appears with great consistency when the political context of its use is seen. The idea of strategic autonomy is always deployed against the prospect of a closer relationship with the United States (US). It is used to caution against getting too close to Washington. In contrast, India's longstanding dependence on Russian weapons is rarely described as a constraint on strategic autonomy. Its far deeper dependence on Chinese industrial inputs, pharmaceutical ingredients, solar cells, rare-earth magnets and electronic components is treated as an economic vulnerability rather than a question of strategic autonomy. India's discourse on strategic autonomy is, in essence, then aimed only at the US and the West. That asymmetry is the subject of this paper.

From Non-alignment to Strategic Autonomy

The idea of preserving New Delhi's freedom of decision is as old as the Indian republic. Non-alignment was the name for it during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, began to cast a shadow over the phrase non-alignment; this was reinforced by India's economic reforms that pushed it to globalise and deepen economic ties with the West. In the political domain though, the problems with the West did not disappear – amid the pressures on acceleration of economic reforms, human rights issues, Kashmir talks with Pakistan and the question of nuclear non-proliferation. That

brought India to a situation in the 1990s and early 2000s where it needed better ties with the West while fending off the Western pressures.

A senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader and a member of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet, Jaswant Singh, made a substantive case for strategic autonomy without using that phrase in his defence of the 1998 nuclear tests.¹ He argued India's case in terms of a discriminatory global nuclear order and the country's right to determine its own security requirements.

The label of strategic autonomy arrived in the middle of the following decade. Shyam Saran, India's Foreign Secretary from 2004 to 2006, has recorded that he introduced the term to reassure domestic critics that the civil nuclear agreement then under negotiation would not constrain India's independent decision-making and foreign policy.² Saran's account deserves emphasis, because 'strategic autonomy' was not coined to describe India's posture towards the world. It was coined to reassure domestic critics about India's posture towards the US. It also underlined the source of the problem – the entrenched distrust of the US in the Indian bureaucracy and the political class.

The first substantial scholarly treatment of the concept of strategic autonomy, published in 2010 by Guillem Monsonis, a French scholar defined strategic autonomy in relational terms as the framework through which India reconciles the presumed tension between independent decision-making with the imperative of close ties to Washington.³ The concept of strategic autonomy acquired greater currency with the publication of a report, 'Nonalignment 2.0',⁴ by a group of eminent people, including Saran, in 2012.

The report performed the decisive conceptual manoeuvre: it made strategic autonomy the permanent value of Indian statecraft since the founding of the republic, and non-alignment merely the Cold War instrument for pursuing it. In a rejoinder to the report, Ashley Tellis identified the political content beneath the abstraction – an exercise, as he read it, in keeping Washington at a distance while hoping to reassure Beijing.⁵ The following year, India's External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid described strategic autonomy, in as many words, as the modern translation of the language of the non-aligned heyday.⁶

¹ Jaswant Singh, "Against Nuclear Apartheid", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1998, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1998-09-01/against-nuclear-apartheid>.

² "India's Strategic Autonomy: Myth or Reality?", *NatStrat*, 28 March 2026, <https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/india-s-strategic-autonomy-myth-or-reality-258.html>.

³ Strategic Analysis, "India's Strategic Autonomy and Rapprochement with the US", Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, July 2010, Volume 34, Issue 4, <https://idsa.in/publisher/strategic-analysis/indias-strategic-autonomy-and-rapprochement-with-the-us>.

⁴ Prakash Menon et al., "NonAlignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century", Centre for Policy Research, 29 February 2012, <https://cprindia.org/briefsreports/nonalignment-2-0-a-foreign-and-strategic-policy-for-india-in-the-twenty-first-century/>.

⁵ Ashley J Tellis, "Nonalignment Redux: The Perils of Old Wine in New Skins", Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, 10 July 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2012/07/nonalignment-redux-the-perils-of-old-wine-in-new-skins>.

⁶ P S Suryanarayana, "India's Strategic Autonomy Mantra", ISAS Special Report No. 13, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 5 July 2013, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/13-indias-strategic-autonomy-mantra/>.

Non-alignment and Autonomy were never Neutral

The academic literature on Indian foreign policy tends to treat both non-alignment and strategic autonomy as expressions of even-handedness among great powers. The historical record does not support this reading of either. Non-alignment was formally symmetrical and operationally asymmetrical from the beginning. India condemned the Anglo-French intervention at Suez in 1956 without qualification and equivocated over the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in the same weeks. Similarly in the 1960s, India was sharply critical of the US' war in Vietnam while reluctant to criticise the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. In the 1980s, India declined to condemn the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1980.

This reflected the special relationship that India had developed with the Soviet Union. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971 was, in substance, an alignment. Some in the political class viewed it in the 1970s as a tilt towards the Soviet Union and demanded 'genuine non-alignment'. However, it did not make much of a difference to the policy of relying on Russia for Indian security. India's decision to pull punches on the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Eastern Ukraine in 2022 underlined the same idea – Russia was too important a partner for India to criticise it.

In the Indian bureaucratic and political culture, the frequent friction with Moscow was managed as a bilateral irritant. Difficulties with Washington were always elevated to the ideological level and framed as a threat to India's independent foreign policy. The context, however, must be noted. While Russia never articulates its differences with India in public, the management of the divergences with the US – big or small – is a public affair that draws everyone into a robust argument about India's relations with America.

This was not hypocrisy so much as structural and is rooted in two factors. The first was the inheritance of the nationalist movement. Indian foreign policy thinking was formed, in the two decades before independence, as part of intensifying anti-colonial struggle. The resolutions of the Indian National Congress criticising the use of Indian troops for imperial purposes, Jawaharlal Nehru's engagement with the anti-imperial internationalism of the interwar years, the widespread conviction that political freedom without economic self-reliance was hollow, and the faith that socialism was the fastest route to national development. When the era of colonialism was succeeded after 1945 by an American-led order incorporating the former metropolitan powers, the Indian political disposition against the West persisted. The habit of reading Western initiative as encroachment outlived the empire that had formed it.

The second source was the Cold War experience which repeatedly confirmed the inherited suspicion. The United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) handling of Kashmir in 1948 taught New Delhi that Britain and the US would treat India's core interest as negotiable. The American military pact with Pakistan in 1954 generated profound antipathy to US regional policy. The Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, the Western sanctions that followed India's 1974 nuclear test and the technology-denial regimes that reinforced the view that the West was hostile to India's interests.

If the West was viewed in Delhi the source of unrelenting international pressures that circumscribed India's choices, the Soviet Union was seen as the answer – as the source of the arms, the UNSC vetoes and the partner in India's industrial modernisation. To be sure, it is possible to imagine alternative pathways in which India's relationship with the US and the West could have evolved during the Cold War. However, the few moments when that seemed possible, for example, the India-US engagement in the John F Kennedy years, did not last too long.

Strategic autonomy inherited this asymmetry baked into non-alignment. A concept devised to defend an agreement with the US against domestic attack was always going to take the US as its implied object. The pattern has held. The nuclear agreement has enlarged India's options by ending its nuclear isolation. However, opponents at home framed it as a surrender of autonomy. The foundational defence agreements with Washington – logistics, communications and geospatial – were delayed for years on the same grounds. Participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is still routinely assessed for its autonomy costs; participation in BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)⁷ or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is not. Monsonis had seen this in 2010, before the universalising claims of the following years obscured it: he built American centrality into his definition of strategic autonomy. The subsequent Indian literature generalised the concept and prevented the discernment of its actual operation.

The Paradox of Partnering the West

The real paradox, though, lies in the fact that the contemporary emphasis on strategic autonomy has gone hand in hand with the rapid expansion of India's ties with the US, Europe and the United Kingdom. The focus on autonomy has grown loudest during the period of India's deepest convergence with the West in the realms of technology, commerce and geopolitics. Three explanations account for this, and they are complementary rather than competing.

The first is domestic legitimation. New Delhi's turn to the US and Europe carried an ideological cost within a political tradition that had defined itself against Western tutelage, and that cost has been paid in vocabulary rather than in policy. Strategic autonomy can be seen as the tariff India levies on its own engagement – a formula that permits convergence in substance while denying it in principle. The second is bargaining. New Delhi is betting that by pursuing alternative options it could improve the terms of engagement with the West. This is routine realpolitik. The third is genuine insurance against the unpredictable use of American power. On the face of it, the 'unipolar moment' has not receded; it has become more discretionary. Secondary sanctions, export controls and extraterritorial enforcement give Washington instruments that fall on partners as readily as on adversaries. The tariff escalation of August 2025 which took duties on Indian goods to 50 per cent, partly in punishment for Russian oil purchases, demonstrated exactly the risk that autonomy discourse anticipates.

⁷ Government of India, 'About BRICS', <https://www.brics2026.gov.in/about-us/>.

As the pressures from the US have grown in the second term of the Donald Trump administration, New Delhi chose to avoid confrontation with the US, focus on negotiating trade and other deals with the US and modulate its approach to the purchase of Russian oil. Underlying this is the recognition of the growing Indian stakes in the relationship with the US. One new dimension has been India's search for wider relations [within the West](#), for example, with Europe and the Anglosphere, rather than the traditional bias towards Russia and China.⁸

Conclusion

As we look to the future, the Indian discourse is unlikely to abandon the concept of strategic autonomy. What our discussion has established is that strategic autonomy cannot function as the general theory of Indian foreign policy that it has become. A concept that continually demands distance from Washington while remaining silent about dependence on Moscow, and almost wholly silent about a manufacturing dependence on Beijing that touches the foundations of India's industrial and military capacity, is not defining India's freedom of action. It is managing an inherited political anxiety about America and the West and mistaking it for a doctrine. The binding constraints on India's choices today are its industrial base, its energy import dependence, its technological gaps, its border dispute with China and Beijing's growing dominance of India's neighbourhood. The relationship with the US is at least a part of the answer to India's challenges. The concept's persistence, therefore, illuminates the domestic politics of India's foreign policy rather than the dynamic evolution of India's national interests that have taken New Delhi closer to the US and Europe than ever before.

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⁸ C Raja Mohan, "C Raja Mohan writes: In a multi-polar West, India's opportunity", *The Indian Express*, 8 October 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/c-raja-mohan-multi-polar-west-india-opportunity-10293865/>.