2026 Volume: 02 Issue: 11 www.ijrpa.com ISSN 2456-9995 Research Article

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

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INDIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN THE PRESENT GLOBAL CONFLICT SCENARIO: BALANCING NATIONAL INTERESTS, DIPLOMACY AND GLOBAL PEACE

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Article Received: 22 September 2026
Article Revised: 12 October 2026
Published on: 01 November 2026

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DOI: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.9461

ABSTRACT

The contemporary international system is marked by overlapping conflicts, strategic rivalry, economic fragmentation and weakening confidence in multilateral institutions. The Russia–Ukraine war, continuing instability in West Asia, intensifying United States–China competition and contestation in the Indo-Pacific have created a complex environment for India. As a rising power with major economic, demographic, military and diplomatic capabilities, India cannot remain detached from these developments. At the same time, India's interests do not fit neatly into any single geopolitical camp. Its relationships with Russia, the United States, Europe, Japan, the Gulf states, Iran and the Global South require a flexible foreign policy that protects strategic autonomy while expanding international cooperation. This paper examines India's strategic position through the concepts of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, national interest, international law and preventive diplomacy. It argues that India's approach should not be understood as passive neutrality. Rather, it represents issue-based engagement designed to preserve decision-making space, protect energy and economic security, strengthen defence preparedness and contribute to conflict resolution. India's role in the G20, BRICS, SCO, Quad and United Nations provides multiple platforms for such engagement. The paper concludes that India can make its greatest contribution to global peace by combining credible national power with principled diplomacy, support for the UN Charter, humanitarian engagement, economic resilience and dialogue among competing powers.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Autonomy; Multi-alignment; Diplomacy; Global Peace; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

The international environment in 2026 is increasingly defined by simultaneous crises rather than a single dominant conflict. The war in Ukraine continues to affect European security, food and energy markets and relations between Russia and Western states. West Asia remains a major source of instability, with conflict involving Israel, Iran and other regional actors carrying consequences far beyond the region. At the same time, strategic competition between the United States and China is reshaping trade, technology, maritime security and the Indo-Pacific. These developments are accompanied by cyber threats, drone warfare, sanctions, supply-chain disruption, terrorism, climate insecurity and competition over critical technologies.

For India, this environment creates both risks and opportunities. India is a nuclear-armed state, a major economy, a leading military power in the Indo-Pacific and an important participant in institutions such as the G20, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Quad and the United Nations. Its geographical position links the Indian Ocean to the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia. Its economic growth depends significantly on secure sea lanes, stable energy supplies, access to technology and predictable international markets. Consequently, conflicts elsewhere can directly affect India's domestic development.

India's strategic response has generally avoided formal alignment with a single great-power bloc. The contemporary expression of this approach is often described as strategic autonomy or multi-alignment. India's objective is to maintain freedom of action while building partnerships with states that share particular interests. This is visible in India's simultaneous engagement with Russia on defence and energy, with the United States and its allies on advanced technology and Indo-Pacific security, with Gulf countries on energy and investment, and with developing countries through Global South diplomacy.

The central argument of this paper is that India's strategic autonomy should be understood as active diplomacy backed by national capability, rather than neutrality or indecision. India can protect its national interests while also contributing to global peace if it combines deterrence with dialogue, diversified partnerships with principled commitment to international law, and economic resilience with humanitarian responsibility.

2. The Present Global Conflict Scenario

The present global conflict environment is multidimensional. First, the Russia–Ukraine

war has become a long-term strategic confrontation with consequences for European security and the global economy. India has maintained relations with both Russia and Ukraine and has repeatedly called for cessation of hostilities, dialogue and diplomacy. In August 2026, Prime Minister Narendra Modi again urged President Vladimir Putin to work toward ending hostilities, stressing the human cost of continuing war. This position reflects India's preference for direct engagement rather than choosing between the parties.[1]

Second, West Asia has become increasingly connected to global security. Conflict involving Israel, Iran and other regional actors can threaten shipping through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, disrupt oil and gas supplies and create humanitarian emergencies. India has significant economic and human interests in the region because of energy imports, trade, diaspora communities and maritime connectivity. India therefore has an interest in de-escalation, freedom of navigation, protection of civilians and diplomatic solutions.[11]

Third, United States–China strategic competition has implications for the Indo-Pacific. Competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, maritime influence, supply chains and military power is transforming the international order. India has a complex relationship with China: it seeks economic engagement where possible but must also manage border tensions and protect its strategic interests. At the same time, India has strengthened cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia through the Quad.

Fourth, modern conflict is no longer limited to conventional battlefield operations. Cyberattacks, disinformation, economic sanctions, financial restrictions, drones, artificial intelligence and disruption of supply chains have become instruments of strategic competition. Recent conflicts demonstrate that industrial capacity and resilient supply chains can be as important as traditional military strength. India's strategic planning must therefore incorporate technological, economic and informational security.[8]

Finally, the conflict environment is accompanied by a crisis of multilateral legitimacy. The United Nations Charter establishes peaceful settlement of disputes and prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of states. Yet international responses to conflicts are frequently influenced by geopolitical interests. India has consistently supported a rules-based international order while also advocating reform of institutions that it considers insufficiently representative of

contemporary realities.

3. India's Strategic Autonomy: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

India's foreign policy has historical roots in non-alignment, but the contemporary approach is different from the Cold War model. During the Cold War, non-alignment sought to prevent India from becoming part of either superpower bloc. After the Cold War, the strategic environment changed dramatically. India's foreign policy consequently expanded toward multiple partnerships, including with the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan, ASEAN, the Gulf and other developing countries.[2]

Strategic autonomy means preserving the capacity to make independent decisions according to India's national interests. It does not mean avoiding partnerships. On the contrary, India has developed more partnerships precisely to increase its strategic options. Multi-alignment enables India to cooperate with different powers on different issues without accepting a rigid alliance structure.

The logic is especially important in the present conflict environment. Russia remains relevant to India's defence capabilities and energy security. The United States and European countries are increasingly important for technology, investment, trade, defence cooperation and higher education. Japan and Australia are important partners in the Indo-Pacific. Gulf countries are central to India's energy security, trade and diaspora interests. Iran has strategic relevance for connectivity with Central Asia, including the Chabahar route. China remains an economic and strategic challenge requiring sustained engagement and risk management.

This network of relationships creates diplomatic leverage but also imposes costs. India must constantly avoid contradictory commitments, preserve trust with partners and explain that cooperation with one state is not necessarily directed against another. Strategic autonomy therefore requires sophisticated diplomacy, credible national capabilities and careful communication.

The distinction between neutrality and strategic autonomy is critical. Neutrality may imply standing aside from conflicts, whereas strategic autonomy allows India to take positions on principles while retaining flexibility on means. India's statements supporting sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement and humanitarian assistance demonstrate that its policy is not value-free. Its objective is to combine principles with national interests.

4. Balancing National Interests

India's foreign policy ultimately rests on the protection and advancement of national interests. In the present conflict environment, five interests are particularly important: national security, energy security, economic stability, technological capacity and the safety of Indian citizens abroad.

National security requires credible military capabilities and deterrence. India's geographical position creates security challenges on both land and sea. The northern borders require attention to China, while the western border and terrorism remain continuing concerns. The Indian Ocean is equally important because a large share of India's trade and energy supplies moves through maritime routes. India therefore needs strong naval capabilities, maritime domain awareness, air and missile defence, space capabilities and cyber resilience.

Energy security is another major concern. India imports a substantial proportion of its crude oil and gas. Conflicts in Europe and West Asia can change prices, insurance costs, shipping routes and availability. India's ability to purchase energy from multiple suppliers is therefore strategically important. Recent disruption in West Asia has demonstrated how conflict can increase India's reliance on alternative suppliers and expose vulnerabilities in strategic reserves and supply chains.

Economic security is closely connected to foreign policy. India seeks continued access to international markets while reducing excessive dependence on any single country for critical goods. Supply-chain diversification, domestic manufacturing and initiatives such as Make in India can reduce external vulnerability. However, economic self-reliance should not become economic isolation. India benefits from global trade, foreign investment and technological partnerships.

Technology is increasingly a strategic resource. Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technologies, telecommunications, space systems and cybersecurity influence both economic competitiveness and military power. India's partnerships with technologically advanced states should therefore be viewed not simply as commercial arrangements but as elements of national security.

The protection of Indian citizens abroad is also a significant foreign-policy objective. Millions of Indians work in the Gulf, Europe, North America and elsewhere. During conflicts, India must undertake evacuation operations, maintain consular access and cooperate with foreign governments. Such operations strengthen India's reputation as a responsible power and demonstrate the practical value of diplomacy.

5. India and the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

India's approach to the Russia–Ukraine war illustrates the difficulty of balancing principles, strategic relationships and national interests. India has expressed concern about the humanitarian consequences of the conflict and repeatedly advocated dialogue and diplomacy. At the same time, India has preserved its longstanding relationship with Russia, including defence cooperation and energy trade.[3,4]

This position is often criticized as insufficiently aligned with Western efforts to isolate Russia. However, India's calculation is more complex. Russian-origin military equipment has historically formed an important part of India's defence inventory, and sudden disengagement could create operational and maintenance risks. Energy trade also has direct implications for India's economy, particularly when global oil prices are volatile. India therefore has an incentive to maintain communication with Moscow while simultaneously strengthening relationships with Western and European partners.

India's diplomatic space can potentially be used constructively. Because India maintains channels with both Russia and Western states, it may be able to support confidence-building, humanitarian initiatives or future negotiations when conditions become favourable. This does not mean that India can single-handedly mediate the conflict. Effective mediation requires consent from the parties and a credible basis for compromise.

The larger lesson is that diplomacy becomes more valuable when political relationships are diverse. A state that has communication with only one side of a conflict has limited influence over the other side. India's continued engagement with multiple actors gives it greater room to encourage restraint. The challenge is to ensure that engagement does not undermine India's stated support for sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful settlement under the UN Charter.

6. India and the West Asia Crisis

West Asia is strategically important for India because of geography, energy, trade, diaspora and maritime connectivity. India has developed close relations with Israel, the Gulf states and Iran while also maintaining historical ties with the wider Arab world. This multi-dimensional diplomacy becomes particularly valuable during periods of conflict.[6]

India's first interest is de-escalation. A wider regional war could affect energy prices,

shipping and Indian citizens living in affected countries. India's second interest is humanitarian protection. India has supported humanitarian assistance and has emphasized dialogue and diplomacy in its statements on regional crises. Its third interest is freedom of navigation and secure commercial routes. The Indian economy depends on uninterrupted access to maritime corridors connecting the Gulf, Red Sea, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

India's relations with Gulf states have become particularly significant. The Gulf is not only an energy source but also a major destination for Indian workers and a source of remittances. Investments, food security, logistics and connectivity are additional dimensions of the relationship.

At the same time, Iran remains important because of its location and India's connectivity interests in Central Asia.

The strategic challenge is to avoid viewing West Asia through a binary lens. India can maintain constructive relations with different regional actors while advocating de-escalation and international law. Such a policy enhances India's ability to protect its citizens and economic interests while creating opportunities for diplomatic engagement.

7. The Indo-Pacific and the China Factor

The Indo-Pacific is central to India's long-term strategic position. China's economic and military rise, maritime activity, infrastructure initiatives and border disputes have transformed India's security calculations. India has therefore strengthened its cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia while also engaging ASEAN and other regional partners.[7]

The Quad is important in this context, but India has not treated the Quad as a traditional military alliance. Its agenda includes maritime security, resilient supply chains, critical technologies, cybersecurity, health and infrastructure. This allows India to cooperate with major partners while preserving strategic autonomy.

At the same time, India must manage the relationship with China carefully. Competition should not automatically become permanent confrontation. Dialogue, confidence-building and economic risk management remain necessary. The objective should be to deter coercion without closing avenues for peaceful resolution.

The Indo-Pacific also demonstrates why maritime power is essential for global peace. India can contribute through information sharing, anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search and rescue, and protection of sea lanes. A secure

Indian Ocean benefits not only India but also trading states across Asia, Africa and Europe.

India's strategy should therefore combine deterrence with reassurance. Military preparedness is necessary to prevent coercion, but stable regional institutions and communication channels are equally necessary to avoid miscalculation.

8. India's Role in Multilateral Diplomacy

India's strategic autonomy is reinforced by participation in multiple international institutions. The G20 provides a platform for economic diplomacy and cooperation among major economies. During India's G20 presidency, the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration emphasized international law, territorial integrity and sovereignty, peaceful resolution of conflicts, diplomacy and dialogue. The declaration also recognized the global economic consequences of war.[5]

BRICS gives India a platform to engage emerging economies and advocate a more representative international order. The SCO provides another channel for engagement across Eurasia, including with Russia and China. The Quad provides a platform for cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia. The United Nations remains the central universal institution for international peace and security.

India's participation in these different groupings demonstrates the logic of issue-based multilateralism. Rather than relying on one institution, India can pursue different objectives through different forums. Economic issues can be addressed through the G20; emerging-economy cooperation through BRICS; Eurasian security through the SCO; maritime and technological cooperation through the Quad; and universal legal and security questions through the UN.

India should continue advocating reform of the UN Security Council. Its permanent membership would better reflect contemporary distributions of population, economic capacity and political influence. However, institutional reform should be accompanied by stronger Indian contributions to peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, development financing, climate action and conflict prevention. A greater global role creates greater responsibility.

9. India as a Potential Bridge and Peace Actor

India's strongest contribution to global peace may lie in its capacity to communicate across geopolitical divisions. India's relationships with Russia, the United States, Europe,

Gulf countries, Iran, Japan, Australia, ASEAN and the Global South create a broad diplomatic network.

This does not make India a neutral mediator in every dispute. A successful mediator must be acceptable to the parties and possess adequate diplomatic leverage. Nevertheless, India can contribute through quiet diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, evacuation operations, confidence-building measures and support for negotiated settlements.[12]

India can also strengthen the idea that diplomacy and national interest are not opposites. A country can protect its security while supporting international peace. In fact, India's national interest often depends on a peaceful international environment. Stable energy markets, secure trade routes, predictable investment and functioning multilateral institutions are necessary for India's development.

The concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' can provide a normative dimension to this role, but India's diplomacy must also remain practical. Global peace cannot be achieved through moral statements alone. It requires economic capacity, defence preparedness, technological strength, credible institutions and sustained diplomatic engagement.

10. Challenges and Criticisms of India's Approach

India's strategy is not without weaknesses. The first criticism is that strategic autonomy can sometimes appear ambiguous. Partners may question India's reliability when India cooperates with states that they regard as adversaries. Managing expectations therefore requires transparent communication.

Second, excessive dependence on any external partner can undermine autonomy. India's historical defence dependence on Russia demonstrates this risk. Diversification of defence procurement, domestic manufacturing and joint production can reduce vulnerability.

Third, energy dependence remains a structural weakness. Diversification of suppliers, renewable energy, nuclear power, strategic petroleum reserves and greater energy efficiency are essential.

Fourth, India's diplomatic capacity must expand alongside its economic and military power. A more active global role requires more diplomats, specialized regional expertise, language capabilities, humanitarian institutions and conflict-analysis capacity.

Fifth, India must maintain consistency in applying international-law principles. The credibility of a rules-based order depends on the perception that rules are applied consistently rather than selectively. India's advocacy of sovereignty and peaceful settlement should therefore remain clear and principled across regions.

Finally, strategic autonomy must not become an excuse for inaction. When civilian populations face humanitarian crises, major powers have responsibilities beyond narrow national calculations. India's international reputation will increasingly depend on its ability to combine realism with humanitarian responsibility.

11. Policy Recommendations

India should pursue a five-part strategy.

First, it should deepen strategic autonomy through diversification. Defence supplies, energy imports, technology partnerships and critical minerals should be sourced from multiple partners wherever economically and strategically feasible.

Second, India should strengthen preventive diplomacy. It can establish specialized diplomatic mechanisms for conflict early warning, humanitarian evacuation, mediation support and regional confidence-building.

Third, India should invest in maritime and technological security. The Indian Ocean should remain a major focus of naval modernization, satellite surveillance, cyber resilience and cooperation with regional states.

Fourth, India should strengthen multilateral institutions. Its diplomacy should continue to support UN reform, peaceful settlement of disputes, international humanitarian law and representative global governance. India can use the G20, BRICS, SCO, Quad and other forums as complementary rather than competing platforms.

Fifth, India should build economic resilience. Strategic petroleum reserves, renewable energy, domestic manufacturing, diversified supply chains, semiconductor capacity, food security and digital infrastructure will reduce the impact of external conflicts on India's domestic economy.

These policies would allow India to pursue national interests without abandoning its wider responsibility to global peace.

12. CONCLUSION

India occupies a distinctive strategic position in the present global conflict scenario. It is neither a passive bystander nor a formal member of a single geopolitical bloc. Its policy

is based on maintaining strategic autonomy, building multiple partnerships and preserving sufficient freedom of action to protect national interests.[1,8]

The Russia–Ukraine war, West Asian instability and Indo-Pacific rivalry demonstrate why such flexibility is valuable. India needs Russia for certain defence and energy interests, Western countries for technology, investment and strategic cooperation, Gulf countries for energy and diaspora interests, and regional partners for maritime and connectivity objectives. No single partnership can satisfy all of India's requirements.

At the same time, strategic autonomy must be supported by credible power. Military modernization, economic resilience, technological capacity and energy diversification are prerequisites for independent diplomacy. A country dependent on a small number of external suppliers has limited strategic freedom.

India can also make a meaningful contribution to global peace. Its ability to maintain communication across geopolitical divides gives it diplomatic value. Its participation in the UN, G20, BRICS, SCO and Quad provides multiple platforms for dialogue. Its humanitarian and evacuation capabilities demonstrate practical responsibility.

Ultimately, India's strategic objective should be to create an international environment in which its national development can proceed peacefully while contributing to a more stable world order. Strategic autonomy should therefore be understood not as neutrality, but as the capacity to choose independently, cooperate widely, deter coercion, defend international law and promote dialogue. In an era of fragmented power and prolonged conflict, that combination of national capability and diplomatic engagement can make India an important balancing and peace-building power.

FOOTNOTES

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