

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The modern international system is in a process of transition, which is changing the political behavior of both the status quo and the rising powers. India is emerging as one of the great powers whose foreign policy is based on the principle of strategic autonomy and aims to balance relations with other great powers.

The article aims to answer the following research questions: 1. What impact have the tariffs imposed by the United States had on India's foreign policy? 2. How does India allocate political priorities in a multipolar system and what is the role of the doctrine of "strategic autonomy"?

India is trying to simultaneously maintain a security partnership with the United States, energy and defense cooperation with Russia, and control economic interdependence with China.

However, the growing confrontation between the US and China, as well as Western sanctions against Russia, are reducing the space for maneuver necessary for India's strategic autonomy. India's modern foreign policy is a multi-vector approach aimed at protecting national interests in the conditions of a new uncertain multipolar order.

India participates in both Western formats (QUAD) and broader associations (BRICS, SCO), thereby trying to satisfy its own interests. Its main goal is to promote the country's economic growth. As a result, its economy has been growing steadily in the past few years. Jaishankar believes that strategic autonomy implies multilateral partnerships, including with opposing powers. This is precisely what explains India's membership in radically different organizations.

In 2025, the Trump administration imposed fifty percent tariffs on India for its oil purchases from the Russian Federation. However, relations with Washington in the field of self-defense have reached a new level after the parties signed a ten-year agreement.

Keywords: foreign policy, strategic autonomy, national interests, tariffs.

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INTRODUCTION

The international system is in the process of transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar system. The diffusion of wealth, knowledge, and technology has created different centers of attraction across the planet. So, it's vital to study the new power centers' foreign policies and their connections and trends. International politics and security researchers primarily focus on China's rise and Russia's aggressive war. However, India has demonstrated significant demographic, economic, and military growth trends in the last few years. Its population is the largest in the world.³ And its economy is growing steadily.

During his rule, Prime Minister N. Modi has strengthened relations with the United States and its allies while maintaining political and economic ties with Russia and China.⁴ However, border incidents have periodically strained relations with Beijing. A clash in the Galwan Valley claimed the lives of 20 Indian military personnel in June 2020.⁵ This fact has significantly complicated Sino-Indian relations.

Western strategic circles view India as a key player in containing China's growing power. There have been many predictions that their relationship will develop into a close alliance. But suddenly, in the second half of 2025, relations between India and the United States began to deteriorate. Since August, the Trump administration has increased tariffs on exports from India.⁶

The reason for this was the fact that India was buying large quantities of oil from the Russian Federation. In 2024, India imported approximately 88 million tons of Russian oil.⁷ Although for Trump, tariffs are primarily a means of maximizing American economic benefits, in this case they also serve Washington's geopolitical goals.

³ World Population Review, "Total Population by Country 2025," World Population Review, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://surl.li/oyrurq>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

⁴ Basrur, Rajesh. "Modi's Foreign Policy Fundamentals: A Trajectory Unchanged." *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiw006>.

⁵ BBC News. "Galwan Valley: China and India Clash on Freezing and Inhospitable Battlefield." June 17, 2020. <https://surl.li/uabdjm>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

⁶ Donald J. Trump, Addressing Threats to the United States by the Government of the Russian Federation, Executive Order, August 6, 2025, The White House, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://surl.li/otqaiw>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

⁷ Kozul-Wright, Alex. "Why Is the US Sparing China, but Not India, for Importing Russian Oil?" Al Jazeera, August 20, 2025. Accessed November 26, 2025. <https://surl.li/spifjz>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

The personal and ideological rapprochement between Modi and Trump was also evident. However, Trump's imposition of tariffs has created an uncomfortable tension between New Delhi and Washington. The article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What impact have the tariffs imposed by the US had on India's foreign policy?
2. How does India allocate strategic political priorities in a multipolar system, and what is the role of the doctrine of "strategic autonomy"?

The paper is a review article covering India's strategic policy from 2022 to the present. India's relations with the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China are used as research cases.

MAIN PART

Modi's maneuver

After Trump's second term as president, relations between India and the US started positively. On February 10-12, 2025, N. Modi was on a working visit to Washington. According to leaders, they agreed to deepen the strategic partnership. To increase trade turnover to \$500 billion by 2030. They also agreed to enhance their cooperation in the areas of technology, defense, and space.⁸ The parties also agreed that an agreement on fair tariffs would be signed between them by the end of the year. Despite the apparent optimistic tone of February, tensions between Washington and New Delhi began to rise in the spring. On April 2, Trump imposed a 25 percent tariff on India.⁹ In response to India's refusal to stop purchasing Russian oil, US has increased tariffs on goods exported from India to the US by another 25 percent. In total, the US tariff on Indian goods has increased to about 50 percent.

Amid the sharp tightening of tariffs, the Indian government undertook a number of notable diplomatic initiatives towards the "Northeast." From 19 to 21 August 2025, Minister

⁸ The White House, "United States–India Joint Leaders' Statement," The White House, February 13, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://surl.li/rvycuo>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

⁹ KPMG Assurance and Consulting Services LLP, U.S. Tariff Shifts: Tariff Revisions and Their Impact on India (September 2025), accessed November 27, 2025, <https://surl.li/abctkr>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar paid an official visit to Moscow, where he chaired the meeting of the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission. During the visit, he met with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, emphasizing the necessity of expanding energy cooperation and trade relations between the two countries.¹⁰

India–Russia trade turnover experienced a sharp increase between 2022 and 2024. In the 2021–2022 fiscal year, bilateral trade amounted to approximately 12 billion USD,¹¹ whereas in the 2022–2023 fiscal year total trade volume reached 49.36 billion USD.¹² By the 2024–2025 fiscal year, trade turnover had exceeded 68 billion USD, marking a record level in the history of bilateral economic relations.¹³ In 2024, the two sides agreed to raise their trade volume to 100 billion USD by 2030, reflecting their shared intention to institutionalize long-term economic cooperation and to deepen their partnership in key sectors such as energy, defense production, and transport logistics.¹⁴

All of this has taken place against the backdrop of the Russian Federation being under sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies, while the Trump administration continues its efforts to pressure Moscow to end the war in Ukraine.

A second notable diplomatic maneuver by India was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, held in China from late August to early September 2025. The political context of this event was directly linked to the tariff pressure imposed on India by the United States. The host country, China, was itself engaged in a trade and tariff dispute with Washington, which prompted questions in international policy circles as to whether India's active engagement in the SCO might signal

¹⁰ Reuters, “India, Russia Agree to Boost Trade Ties after Foreign Ministers Meet in Moscow,” Reuters, August 21, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://surl.li/kvrrga>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

¹¹ Yakov Sergienko et al., Upside Potential of India–Russia Cooperation Is up to USD 200 bn (Yakov and Partners, September 2023), accessed November 28, 2025, <https://surl.li/cluvrs>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

¹² Yesi Seli, “External Affairs Minister Jaishankar to Visit Russia from December 25–29,” The New Indian Express, December 24, 2023, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://surl.li/rhmxtj>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

¹³ Embassy of India, Moscow. “Overview.” Embassy of India, Moscow. Last modified November 28, 2025. <https://surl.li/kfdmdy>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

¹⁴ TradeImeX. “India and Russia Set Ambitious \$100 Billion Trade Goal by 2030: Exploring Strategic Economic Cooperation.” TradeImeX, July 11, 2024. accessed November 27, 2025, <https://surl.li/tgijpz>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

a gradual rapprochement with the Russia-China geopolitical bloc in response to American economic coercion. Several analysts have observed a direct correlation between Prime Minister Modi's increased involvement within the SCO framework and the intensification of tariff measures introduced by the Trump administration, interpreting India's actions as part of a broader strategy to preserve strategic autonomy amid escalating great-power rivalries.¹⁵ This should be a signal to Washington that India has alternative geopolitical and geoeconomic platforms.

Indian expert **Manoj Kumar Panigrahi**, Associate Professor at Jindal School of International Affairs, thinks that "India's purchase of oil from Russia was based on its domestic needs and rational. As one of the largest consumers of natural resources, it is natural for New Delhi to look for its cheapest sources. Both countries are strategic partners to each other and historically they have always come to each other aid."¹⁶ To our question „Do you see India–Russia relations as a temporary “energy alliance,” or could they once again evolve into a broader strategic partnership? His answer was: “No it is not limited to energy alliance, it goes beyond that. I think, Russia’s policy is – Even if India do not align with us, it is better to keep it as friend rather than see it as outsider unlike United States.”¹⁷

Russia is not perceived by India as an adversary, nor does it pose a direct threat to India's national interests; consequently, cooperation between the two states remains both possible and pragmatic. The complex situation surrounding Russia following its aggressive war in Ukraine has, in fact, created new opportunities for India. The availability of discounted Russian energy resources serves the needs of India's rapidly growing economy, which requires stable and affordable energy supplies to sustain its development trajectory. At the same time, this trade has generated significant financial gains for segments of India's business elite, who are directly engaged in these transactions.

¹⁵Amit Ranjan, “Trump Tariffs Prompt India to Rethink China Ties,” East Asia Forum, September 18, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://surl.cc/nzskgt>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

¹⁶ Levan Gegeshidze's interview with Manoj Kumar Panigrahi, Associate Professor at Jindal School of International Affairs.

¹⁷ Ibid.

India and Russia share a long-standing tradition of military cooperation, dating back several decades. For much of the post-independence period, Moscow has remained New Delhi's main supplier of defense equipment and technology. Although in recent years India has sought to diversify its defense imports—strengthening procurement ties with the United States, France, and Israel—Russian-origin systems still account for approximately 60 percent of India's total military arsenal. This enduring defense partnership reflects both the historical depth of bilateral relations and India's continued interest in maintaining a degree of strategic and technological continuity with Russia, even as it gradually expands cooperation with Western defense partners.¹⁸

Relation between India and China

As for India's rapprochement with China, it is widely believed that this is more of a tactical maneuver than a long-term strategic partnership. India's second adversary in the region, after Pakistan, is China. Despite the Sino-Indian rapprochement, there is a lack of trust between them. This assumption is also shared by an Indian expert **Manoj Kumar Panigrahi**, namely „For India, China has broken trust in 1962, and in 2020. Additionally, its support to Pakistan in all means limits an enhanced cooperation between the two“.¹⁹ Thus, the border dispute between the countries and especially cooperation with Pakistan hinders the long-term strategic partnership between China and India.

India's primary adversary is Pakistan, backed by China. China's competition with the US in the security sphere is growing stronger every day, so India is becoming an important asset for the United States. India has excellent relations with Russia, which is China's strategic partner and is increasingly dependent on Beijing. Of course, New Delhi understands very well that in the long term, America's most dangerous adversary is not Russia, due to its weak economy and its military, which is less qualified and poorly armed than America's. Perhaps that is why India shows some boldness in their relations with

¹⁸ Kaushik, Krishn. "India Pivots Away from Russian Arms, but Will Retain Strong Ties." Reuters, January 29, 2024. <https://surl.li/qkquy5>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

¹⁹ Author interview- Manoj Kumar Panigrahi, Associate Professor at Jindal School of International Affairs.

Russia. The strategic environment before Trump's tariffs still allowed India to cooperate with Russia in a way that did not harm its other national interests.

Scholar Keshor Mahbubani, in his hypothetical memorandum, advises Xi Jinping to prevent an alliance between the US and India. Preventing such a scenario should be a central task of China's long-term strategy. Otherwise, if India becomes closely associated with the US-led alliance, it will significantly prolong the period of Western global dominance.²⁰ However, for this, China must take real steps to resolve border disputes with India and convince New Delhi that its relations with Pakistan are not directed against India.

According to the logic of realism in international relations theory, China's rise and its actions should push India to enter alliances created to balance Beijing. True, India is a member of QUAD, which is considered an alliance created to contain China, but it is also a member of BRICS and SCO. For India, strategic autonomy in the modern context does not mean isolation or neutrality, but rather maintaining flexibility in the global system.²¹ Jaishankar believes that strategic autonomy implies multiple partnerships, including with opposing powers.²² This is precisely what India's membership in radically different organizations is all about.

In terms of economic relations, India's dependence on China is increasing day by day. China is currently India's second-largest trading partner.²³ In 2024, the trade turnover between them amounted to 138.48 billion US dollars. Of this, 120.48 billion was Chinese exports to India.²⁴ In 2025, direct frames were restored between the countries, and negotiations began to facilitate trade.

Beijing may also have its own motives for improving Sino-Indian relations, namely economic and demographic. Experts talk about China's internal problems; in particular,

²⁰ Mahbubani, Kishore. *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2020.

²¹ R. K. Singh, *India's Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific: Balancing Strategic Autonomy and Great Power Rivalry* (Supremo Amicus, 2025), <https://surl.li/vjuccj>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²² S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. HarperCollins. (2020).

²³ Tekwani, Shyam. "The Cage of Equidistance." *Security Nexus*, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, September 9, 2025. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.lu/mnxhsr>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²⁴ Zhou, Qian and Giulia Interesse. "China-India Economic Ties: Trade, Investment, and Opportunities." *China Briefing*, June 20, 2025. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.lt/unsgqa>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

China's population is aging rapidly, and therefore the labor force is shrinking.²⁵ There is also some stagnation in the real estate sector within the country.²⁶ After the Covid pandemic, the growth dynamics of its economy are on average lower than in the pre-pandemic period.²⁷ Therefore, India's growing economy and middle class may be a favorable target for Chinese export-oriented businesses.

CONCLUSION

The US imposition of tariffs on India was soon followed by sanctions on Russian companies „Rosneft“ and „Lukoil“. This means that secondary sanctions can be imposed on any company that does business with these companies. According to Trump, Prime Minister Modi promised him to stop buying Russian oil. Otherwise, “massive sanctions” would be imposed against India.²⁸ Trump's rhetoric and actions create massive political pressure on New Delhi. Which makes us wonder whether India's importance is being exaggerated in the context of the US-China confrontation.

Amidst these tense political relations, a 10-year defense framework agreement was signed between India and the United States in Kuala Lumpur on October 31, 2025. The agreement was signed on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' meeting and covers issues such as intelligence sharing, technology cooperation, and shared security in the Indo-Pacific theater. The first deal for the purchase, maintenance, and service of military equipment, worth approximately \$894 million, was signed in November after the agreement was signed.²⁹

²⁵ Muir, Dirk, Natalija Novta, and Anne Oeking. China's Path to Sustainable and Balanced Growth. IMF Working Paper WP/24/238. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2024. Accessed november 16, 2025. <https://surl.li/quqmdb>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²⁶ World Bank. China Economic Update – December 2024. Washington, DC: World Bank, December 26, 2024. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.li/abispy>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²⁷ World Bank. “China Overview: Development News, Research, Data.” World Bank. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.li/izsmxa>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²⁸ Smith, Helena. “Trump Says Modi Has Assured Him India Will Not Buy Russian Oil.” Reuters, October 15, 2025. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.li/nzmhty>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

²⁹ “ASEAN Defense Ministers Meet in Malaysia.” AP News, November 20, 2025. Accessed November 28, 2025. <https://surl.lt/qdjsstt>, (Accessed 28. 11.2025.)

Thus, on the one hand, we have Trump's high tariffs on goods imported from India, and on the other hand, cooperation in the military sphere. Moreover, Trump has imposed sanctions on Russian oil companies, a move that also presents a risk to Indian energy companies. On the other hand, we have a qualitative deepening of cooperation in the defense sector. It appears that the American political elite approaches relations with India with the same principle as New Delhi itself, and its main strategist, S. Jaishankar, views the world. "We will align with interests, not with alliances."³⁰

India's energy cooperation with Russia has run counter to America's interest in forcing Russia to end the war and sign a peace agreement with Ukraine and, in a sense, with the West as a whole. As it turns out, strategic autonomy comes at a price, and a country's diplomacy must anticipate its ally's core strategic interests.

Thus, we can conclude that India's policy in a multipolar system is aimed at becoming a great power itself, and not part of any alliance. The main goal of its multi-vector policy is to obtain maximum benefits for India, to increase its economic and military power. To achieve this aim, India maneuvers between the USA, Russia and China as much as possible viewing these countries as a source for its development and modernization.

It cooperates with the United States in the field of security and high technologies, maintains an energy partnership with Russia. It perceives the Pakistan-China alliance as a threat, but it also realizes and strives for the benefits obtained as a result of economic cooperation with China.

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³⁰ S. Jaishankar, The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World. HarperCollins. (2020).

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