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INDIA'S 'STRATEGIC AUTONOMY' AND STRENGTHENING ITS TIES WITH THE US

'STRATEGICZNA AUTONOMIA' INDII I WZMACNIANIE JEJ WIĘZI Z USA

Abstract:

Immediately after independence, India joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which allowed it to avoid having to take sides with either of the then-existing two political-military blocs led by the US and the USSR. India under Jawaharlal Nehru, guided in foreign policy by principles derived from the traditions of Indian civilization, was not even able to anticipate and prevent China's aggression in 1962. Nehru's idealistic approach adopted by the Congress Party failed to ensure the permanence of power, and in 2014 the conservative-nationalist Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party) won the election, taking India's sovereignty and national interest as its supreme political imperative. The purpose of this article is to explain how the BJP government is striking a balance between India's traditional NAM-based strategic culture and growing defense ties with the US in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, it was necessary to present the evolution of Indian politics from radical non-alignment, grounded in the traditional value of non-violence (*ahinsa*), to so-called strategic autonomy.

Keywords: India, USA, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Autonomy, Non-Alignment Movement.

Introduction

The behavior of a state in international politics depends on the root of the strategic culture that a country has. Despite some debate about its utility, strategic culture has become a commonly used phrase in the sense of a "shaping framework" for strategic behavior. A nation's strategic culture is influenced by geography, history, national culture,

politics, economy, technology, and other factors¹ (Johnston 1995). After independence, India promoted the concept of "non-alignment," which still exists in some form in Indian policymaking. Unlike China or Pakistan, postcolonial India did not seek alliances with strong countries to strengthen its national security, remaining "nonaligned" even after major wars in 1962 and 1965. However, the post-Cold War international order and the approach to international relations have changed drastically. S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, recently stated that *'non-alignment is a concept that is relevant in a specific era and context, but the independence of action enshrined in it remains a factor of continuity in India's foreign policy. This is about as explicit as our political leaders are likely to get about an obvious post-Cold War fact: non-alignment as a foreign policy concept is dead'* (Ragavan 2020). On the contrary, despite the fact that *real politik* and Hindu nationalism provide alternatives to the Nehruvian legacy that has dominated Indian strategic culture since 2014, Nehruvianism continues to dominate the country's strategic thought.

Strategic autonomy was one, which quickly acquired an anti-US connotation similar to non-alignment. Multi-alignment has not been universally welcomed because, as the Foreign Minister stated elsewhere, it may give the impression of opportunism, whereas India seeks strategic convergences. If the twenty-first century is the Asian Century, then Asia's waters will be the next battleground (Kaplan 2011). The maritime domain in Asia is rapidly changing, thereby altering the security architecture in place since the Cold War's end. It is not that India is unaware of the changes in its security environment or is not attempting to change its policies, but it is allowing non-alignment principles to stifle its vision. As argued in ORF 2016² commentaries, India must recognize that non-alignment does not imply non-engagement. The world is rapidly moving toward a multi-polar security model in which India can play a significant role. India and the region are aware of this, but the fear of being dragged into an alliance is slowing New Delhi's progress.

¹ As modern scholars emphasize, an overwhelming influence on the formation of Indian strategic culture was exerted by the unique features of Indian civilization embodied in ancient scripts and expressed in the supreme values of this civilization, derived from Buddhism and Hinduism (comp. e.g. Rowntree, Lewis, Price, Wyckoff, 2000, pp. 511-515; Wilczyński, 2021, pp. 231-236).

² *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-non-aligned-dilemma/>.

On the broader spectrum, having a strategic dilemma has always been India's major challenge. Take it India's neighborhood policy (Aryal 2021) or India's recent confusion on Non-Alignment, Multi-alignment or strategic autonomy. As a result of that international community often criticize India's position. India risks becoming increasingly marginalized in an emerging global order marked by renewed bifurcation fueled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. The Indo-Pacific region can be viewed as a microcosm of this. On the one hand, India maintains an official commitment to an open and inclusive regional architecture based on the increasingly irrelevant principle of "ASEAN centrality." At the same time, New Delhi maintains a lukewarm support for more exclusive and functionally driven plurilateral groupings such as the Quad, where New Delhi is unwilling to become entangled in more institutionalized regional initiatives such as the Five Eyes or AUKUS (Bajpae 2022).

Thus, this article attempts to discuss India's position in Indo-Pacific from the angle of 'strategic autonomy'. Likewise, India's position in the region and increasing defense cooperation with the USA raise the different set of questions on India's existing belief on international position. So, the article also aims to discuss India-USA relations from the eye of strategic autonomy perspective.

From 'Non-Alignment' to 'Strategic Autonomy'

Non-alignment is frequently portrayed as either a counter-hegemonic critique of contemporary world order or a rhetorical justification for maximizing national interest, both of which are plausible descriptions of India's foreign policy behavior over the last 60 years. The former sees non-alignment as a product of India's 'Gandhian' legacy in foreign policy, the moral force of a political subjectivity based on nonviolent struggle, and draws a direct line from anti-colonial struggle to independent India's foreign policy worldview (Abraham 2008).

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was created and founded at the height of the Cold War, during the collapse of the colonial system and the independence struggles of peoples in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other parts of the world. During the Movement's early days, its actions played an important role in the decolonization process, which led to the attainment of freedom and independence by many countries and peoples, as well as the establishment of tens of new sovereign states. Throughout its history, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries has played a critical role in maintaining global peace and security. While

there were some meetings with a third-world perspective prior to 1955, historians believe that the Bandung Asian-African Conference was the most immediate precursor to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. This Conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia, on April 18-24, 1955, and brought together 29 Heads of State from the two continents to identify and assess world issues of the time, as well as to pursue joint policies in international relations³.

Although it is an outcome of the decolonization and the distance mentality toward the bloc politics, the meaning and the instrumentalization of the NAM changed after end of the Cold War. More recently, it has become fashionable to view non-alignment as nothing more (or less) than the rational outcome of a calculated approach to maximizing national interests in a context dominated by Cold War bipolarity. According to this logic, non-alignment was the best way to gain economic leverage from competing superpowers seeking to attract newly independent countries to their side. As a result, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, India also has re-defined the NAM. Specially after the rise of BJP government in power the re-definition of NAM has often coined as NAM 2.0 or Multi-alignment. The core goal of a strategic approach should be to provide India with the most options in its relations with the rest of the world—that is, to increase India's strategic space and capacity for independent agency, which will provide it with the most options for internal development. In a changing world, such an approach will preserve and sustain two core objectives of non-alignment. This policy can thus be characterized as 'NONALIGNMENT 2.0,' a modernization of the fundamental principle that has defined India's international engagements since Independence. Non-primary alignment's goals were to ensure that India did not define its national interests or approach to world politics in terms of ideologies and goals established elsewhere; that India retained maximum strategic autonomy to pursue its own developmental goals; and that India worked to build national power as the foundation for creating a more just and equitable global order (Khilnani 2014).

Strategic autonomy refers to a country's ability to pursue its national interests and pursue its preferred foreign policy without being constrained in any way by other countries. Strategic autonomy, in its

³ *History and Evolution Of Non-Aligned Movement*. 2012, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?20349/History+and+Evolution+of+NonAligned+Movement>

purest form, assumes that the state in question possesses vastly superior power. This is what would allow that state to withstand pressures from other countries to change its policy or moderate its interests. In theory, only a single superpower in a unipolar international order has true strategic autonomy because it is the only country with overwhelming economic, industrial, military, and technological capabilities and thus the ability to resist pressure from all other states.⁴ In New Delhi, however, there are differing views on what strategic autonomy entails in practice. There is particular disagreement about which activities and countries enhance and which limit India's autonomy. Some non-aligned supporters see strategic autonomy as a warning against a closer partnership with the United States, which they believe would limit India's freedom of action (Smith 2020). At the same time, in current academia India-US partnership specially in Indo-Pacific has been coined as India's move for a 'Strategic Autonomy'.

India in Indo-Pacific

India's pursuit of its position as a rising and competitive power globally has enlarged the country's extended neighbourhood. For this, the maritime space has always been a vital space for India. Presently, India has realised the numerous opportunities and challenges emanating from one of the crucial maritime domains of the Indo-Pacific region. This extension of the neighbourhood by India, many explain, to be an 'essential' involvement, and some say it is an 'unnecessary' entanglement (Doyle & Rumley, 2019). India is an essential player in the Indo-Pacific region, underlining the increasing maritime geopolitical competition, particularly the rise of China. The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a geographic space of connexion in the new strategic reality. Although the Indian Ocean region has always been a part of the Indian sub-continent, maritime security for India has long remained outside the strategic and foreign policy concerns (Singh, Khan, Thoker, & Lone, 2022). Thus, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region has provided an alternative space for strategic and foreign policy engagements in the new maritime geopolitical conditions. The other significant actors, like the United States, Japan, and Australia, have encouraged and promoted the critical role of India in this region, citing their common interests (Baruah, 2020).

⁴ Aravind Devanathan asked: *What is 'strategic autonomy'? How does it help India's security?*, 2015, Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis. https://idsa.in/askanexpert/strategicautonomy_indiasecurity.

The role of India can be analysed through different lenses. India's increasing footprints in the region can be observed as a search for an opportunity for trade, investments, and economic cooperation (Baruah, 2020). Moreover, India in the Indo-Pacific region can be analysed as an attempt to increase the strategic and diplomatic partnerships with the countries like the United States, France, Japan, and Australia, as the region is going to matter for India for securing the security environment as the priorities are similar (Thankachan, 2021). However, the capabilities remain different. Along with the ambitions, the challenges for India in the region remains pertinent. These elements of India's association with the Indo-Pacific region will provide a clear picture of new geopolitical challenges and a shift in foreign policy from non-alignment to strategic autonomy (Banerjee, 2022).

Realising the shared strategic challenges with other countries against China in the region, India has primarily involved itself in finding balance with its most competitive actor in the international domain. India's involvement in the region signifies the renewal of its partnership with the West and decreasing its capacity constraints in securing its strategic interests. Under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian foreign policy has made changes realising the challenges put forward by China in terms of military modernisation and economic capacity. The penetration of China into India's immediate neighbourhood through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects has created tensions in New Delhi, pushing the Indian decision-makers to the Indo-Pacific region (Ranjan, 2021). Furthermore, the USA, Japan, and Australia are promoting India's role in the region, which presents India with an immense opportunity. Hence, the shift of India's foreign policy to strategic autonomy can be discussed because of the geopolitical challenges.

The shift of foreign policy by India, at first, comes in defining and laying out its approach to the new construct of the Indo-Pacific region. The intentions of strategic autonomy were clearly put forward by Prime Minister Modi in Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 (Baruah, 2020). This can be taken as the pivotal point for India to act with strategic autonomy as it was clear that alliances with the West can bring perfect balance against China, and the understanding of the region can be a platform for a rising country in world politics. However, the strategic autonomy alternative opted for by India cannot be comprehended as bandwagoning with the West. It should be analysed as New Delhi's position to make itself more visible and expand its security role in the region (Saha, 2022).

Additionally, Southeast Asia, which is the second theatre of interest for New Delhi, was also being primarily influenced by China (Saha, 2022). The commercial and investment opportunities in the ASEAN countries are crucial for India (Roy, 2022). The creation of hindrances in the Act East Policy of India by China in Southeast Asia is among the specific regions that the country has taken initiatives to shift its foreign policy actions (Roy, 2022). These stances in the geopolitical domain have led many to raise questions about the shifting foreign policy goals of India. India was hesitant to be perceived as a member of a Western nation-led alliance to oppose China, even as the Indo-Pacific region as a whole offered new prospects and a platform to improve India's security profile. In hindsight, India's intention was clear, which was to leverage the Indo-Pacific to further its strategic goals and adapt to a shifting security landscape. The Indo-Pacific region provides options for New Delhi that improve its strategic position.

Moreover, the region offers India huge commercial, economic, and developmental opportunities. India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is guided by the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) (Singh, Khan, Thoker, & Lone, 2022). These have also lured India to the region and ultimately justified its changing foreign policy objectives. They enable India to interact with its Indo-Pacific neighbours in various contexts, such as maritime resource management, the growth of the blue economy, maritime connectivity, disaster management, and capacity building, either bilaterally or on multilateral platforms. An important area of concern for the Indo-Pacific region is trade and economy. India's primary assets include its approach to regional finance and credit, supply chain resilience, and the soft power it derives from its extensive diaspora network (Baruah, 2020). Utilising cutting-edge technology like green hydrogen and focusing on areas like the blue economy where pre-existing frameworks and processes may be used to foster tighter economic cooperation are the ways to drive growth in the Indo-Pacific region for India. India's Look East policy, more recently, Act East policy, plays a significant role in shaping its vision for the Indo-Pacific region (Roy, 2022). India has trade agreements with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Japan, Nepal, and the ASEAN nations in the Indo-Pacific area (Saha, 2022). It has also held discussions with Australia and New Zealand. India's vision for 2030 includes ten growth sectors and trade-related elements like infrastructure development that may be realised through trade in the Indo-Pacific region (Banerjee, 2022).

Therefore, the role of India in the Indo-Pacific region is guided by geopolitical concerns and economic opportunities. The serious geopolitical apprehensions and huge economic prospects in the region have led to a shift in the foreign policy objectives and behaviours of India. Unlike its policies in the post-Cold War period, the strategic interests in the Indian and Pacific region are increasing with its rise as a major power in the world. Although India has been hesitant in accepting changes in its foreign policy behaviours, the changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region providing huge opportunities for India along with partners of common interests can be taken as justification for the shift.

Deepening India-US ties in Indo-Pacific

To analyse India's foreign policy shift towards strategic autonomy, it is crucial for us to examine the increasing cooperation between India and the USA at different levels. The change in the pattern of foreign policy behaviour of India is reflected through the deepening strategic cooperation between two countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The continuity and deepening relationship between India and the USA were primarily established between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump and continues with President Joe Biden. The theatre of the Indo-Pacific region has provided a platform for both to position strengthened bilateral relations. India has placed cooperation with the USA in the region at utmost importance, and similarly, New Delhi is central to the strategies in the Indo-Pacific region (Sibal, 2020).

The cooperation between the two countries is primarily focused on the strategic domain in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries are focused on countering the rise of China. India's most all-encompassing strategic partner is the US, with which it cooperates in a wide range of fields, including commerce, defence, multilateralism, intelligence, cyber security, civil nuclear energy, education, and healthcare (Singh, 2019). Beyond strategic ties, the relationship extends from the bilateral to the multilateral level while embracing a more comprehensive range of issues, such as civilian nuclear cooperation and nuclear non-proliferation, infrastructure financing, the production and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, peacekeeping and education, space and cyber security, countering terrorism and extremism, ocean governance, and promoting a free and open world (Singh, Khan, Thoker, & Lone, 2022). However, economic and commercial cooperation remains the weakest link between the two in the region. India declined to participate in trade negotiations with the

US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), making it the only member of the 14-nation group to reject the organisation's trade negotiating track.

Meanwhile, the QUAD (comprising of India, Australia, Japan, and the US) revived in 2017, and the new West Asian I2U2 (consisting of Israel, India, United Arab Emirates, and the US) formed in 2021 is the platform through which the strategic relationship between India and the USA function. For India and the US, the QUAD has emerged as a preeminent forum for pursuing focused multilateral cooperation, while the new West Asian I2U2 emphasises technological cooperation (Kugelman, 2022). The two countries also launched a new "2+2" defence and foreign ministers dialogue. Three significant "foundational" military agreements were signed between India and the US between 2016 and 2020: the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). A significant milestone was reached in the MALABAR 2020 naval exercise when India invited Australia to take part for the first time since 2007 (Thakker, 2021). Much of the strategic collaboration between the United States and India has been fuelled by navy-to-navy contact (Baruah, 2020). The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by the USA, which also has reduced its dependence on Pakistan, will likely increase the cooperation between India and the USA in the area of counter-terrorism and military intelligence (Rajagopalan, 2022).

Notably, India and the United States have acknowledged the growing threat presented by China's assertiveness in the area. China's growing capability and influence across the Indo-Pacific increases the robustness and durability of the US-India. They have committed towards a more enduring and decisive role in the Indo-Pacific. The ties are increasing between the two like-minded countries to counter China's economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might (Singh, Khan, Thoker, & Lone, 2022). The threat perception of India towards China and conflicts in the borders have likely increased the cooperation between India and the USA. The mutual perceived enemy by both countries is the primary factor which has enhanced the relationship. A seat at the Quadrilateral table allows India to confront China's aggressiveness, opens the door to an Indo-Pacific that is "free, open, and inclusive," and advances India's understanding of foreign security (Doyle & Rumley, 2019).

Therefore, India's deepening relationship with the USA in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly on the strategic and military front, will help to justify the shift in the foreign policy behaviour towards strategic autonomy. Many argue about the multi-alignment and internationalist character of Indian foreign policy. However, whatever jargon they may employ and although the India-US mutual strategic interest is considerable in the region, India has been able to pursue its national interest or goal. It is an intent to pursue strategic autonomy. With cooperation with the USA and other major powers by participating in several multilateral forums, India is successfully forwarding its national interest and ambition of becoming a major power in the region. Nevertheless, the US administration is aware of India's desire for issue-based alliances and strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

After the assessment above, we can conclude the paper by saying three main things. First, the NAM has been instrumentalized by some states as a hedging tool. So, as for India as well, the NAM has become a way to justify their action or the policy response. Second, the fate of India and the USA in Indo-Pacific is intertwined by their need. India, on the one hand, needs a partner with defense superiority to check and balance China's rise in the region, and on the other hand, USA needs a partner with growing defense capabilities to share a responsibility in the region. And thirdly, it is India's weakest point among the policy-making circle that they always have a problem defining and delimiting certain strategies. So, the exact definition and usability of 'Strategic Autonomy' also hard to detect with respect to India, which recently also created international buzz concerning India's position in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Nevertheless, despite not finding definition of the terminology, we can clearly see the shift from NAM toward something multi-alignment or strategic autonomy. As justified by the Indian government time and again, the relations with the United States also formed as an outcome of India's attempt to gain a strategic autonomy. Having said that India's strategic autonomy and increasing engagement with USA raise the question whether India's behavior in Indo-Pacific is anchored by the interest of USA or not?

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Streszczenie:

Wkrótce po uzyskaniu niepodległości India przystąpiła do Ruchu Państw Niezaangażowanych, który pozwalał na uniknięcie konieczności opowiadania się po stronie żadnego z istniejących wówczas dwóch bloków polityczno-militarnych, którym przewodziły USA i ZSRR. India pod rządami Jawaharlala Nehru, kierując się w polityce zagranicznej zasadami wynikającymi z tradycji indyjskiej cywilizacji, nie były nawet zdolne przewidzieć i zapobiec agresji Chin w 1962 roku. Idealistyczne podejście Nehru przyjęte przez Partię Kongresową nie zapewniło trwałości władzy i w 2014 roku wybory wygrała konserwatywno-nacjonalistyczna Indyjska Partia Ludowa (Bharatiya Janata Party), dla której suwerenność i interes państwowy Indii stanowią naczelną imperatywy polityczne. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wyjaśnienie, w jaki sposób rząd BJP osiąga równowagę między tradycyjną kulturą strategiczną Indii opartą na niezaangażowaniu, a rosnącymi więzami obronnymi z USA w regionie Indo-Pacyfiku. Dlatego niezbędne było przedstawienie ewolucji indyjskiej polityki od radykalnego niezaangażowania, mającego swoje oparcie w tradycyjnej wartości jaką stanowi powstrzymanie się od przemocy (*ahinsa*) do tzw. strategicznej autonomii.

Słowa kluczowe: India, USA, Indo-Pacyfik, Autonomia Strategiczna, Ruch Niezaangażowania (NAM).