International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 09 Issue 02 February 2026

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v9-i2-55, Impact factor- 8.007

Page No: 1382-1388

Balancing China and the United States: Assessing the Efficacy of India's Multi-Alignment in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT: The expanding rift between the United States of America (USA) and China has moved beyond trade disputes to a wider strategic and systemic competition. India finds itself at the Centre of this transforming global order, and its growing ambition, capabilities, and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region enable it to play a more significant role in world affairs. Therefore, India's foreign policy has a significant weight in determining peace, prosperity, and stability in the region. Hence, the paper first analyses the changing nature of India's foreign policy from strategic autonomy to strategic autonomy 2.0, which emphasises on multi-alignment and the challenges before it. Secondly, it examines, through the prism of triangular diplomacy, how India navigates the "USA-China-India" dynamic, leveraging growing defence and technological ties with the USA to counter China's hegemonic ambitions, while also managing critical economic interdependencies and border stability with China. Lastly, it discusses "Modified India," which shows its posture of strategic reciprocity, signalling readiness to deliver a calibrated and resolute response to any provocation.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Autonomy 2.0, Modified India, USA, China, Indo-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world order is going through a drastic change, which is primarily visible in the growing rivalry between the USA and China. This systemic rift is not limited to trade disputes, but it has become an all-encompassing competition for hegemony, ideological supremacy, and technological supremacy (Allison, 2017). As the USA and China engage in conflict, many scholars like Suisheng Zho ("A New Cold War? Causes and Future of the Emerging US-China Rivalry") Henry Kissinger ("the foothills of a Cold War") and Kevin Rudd ("Cold War 2.0") have described it in their work as a new Cold War, which divides the world into competing blocks, placing massive pressure on middle powers to choose sides, as previously in the old Cold War (Brands and Gaddis, 2021). India, which is situated at the geographical and strategic heart of this contest. Its booming market, driven by strong GDP growth estimated at over 8% (ICRA, 2025), increasing per capita income, expanding military capabilities ranked as 4th most powerful (Global Firepower, 2025) and more importantly, its pivotal location in the Indo-Pacific, allows India to rather being passive observer to an active participant and place it as the central pole in the emerging multi-polar world order (Singh,2023).

Therefore, the paper uses the triangular diplomatic framework to discuss the relations between the USA-China-India triad. The origin of this framework is a foreign policy of the USA, which was developed by Henry Kissinger during the Vietnam War to manage the relations between the contesting Communist powers, the Soviet Union and China. The purpose of this policy was to exploit the ongoing rivalry between two communist powers as an instrument to strengthen American hegemony and diplomatic interest, as well as to deal with the decline of American authority during the war. Hence, the terminology denotes linking the interests of three powerful states to retain a balance of power within the international system (Gokhale, 2021).

The starting point of the triangular diplomacy between the USA, China, and India was the Indo-US nuclear deal that persists till this day. The border dispute between India and China has not resolved, and India developed important military ties to the USA, without becoming an American ally or endorsing America's Indo-Pacific formulations (Gokhale, 2021). Hence, under this framework, India, as a middle power and its foreign policy, is not merely a series of bilateral agreements but a sophisticated balancing act among the USA, China, and India. By strengthening its side of the triangle with the USA, India gains the necessary leverage to manage its relationship with a more assertive China (Madan,2020). Following this approach, India has a challenging task with a complex balancing act: giving direction to the "USA-China-India" dynamic where its actions automatically change the balance of power in Asia and the rest of the world (Malon & Mukhejee, 2019).

The central focus of this paper is on how India is operationalising its strategy of "multi-alignment," or issue-based partnership, and the challenges it faces while doing this endeavour. Under this, India is strengthening technological and defence ties with the USA

to counter China's hegemonic ambitions, while managing its critical economic interdependencies, border stability, and peace with China.

Lastly, the concept of "modified India," a posture of strategic reciprocity which gives signals of a readiness to provide adequate responses to any provocations that harm India's national interest, especially from China. Through these analyses, the paper will demonstrate how India is creating a unique space for itself in world politics, which ensures India as an independent sovereign rather than a junior partner in bilateral alliances in the balance of power.

Changes in the Foreign Policy of India: Idealism to Strategic Autonomy 2.0

India, after its independence, adopted the foreign policy of 'non-alignment.' This doctrine was propounded by the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, a moral refusal to join any power blocs in the Cold War politics; in other words, it is called strategic autonomy (Ganguly,2020). To preserve its independent decision-making, India adopted "Equidistance" to maintain a safe distance from both the United States and the Soviet Union. However, at the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a unipolar world order exposed the limitations of this approach (Saran,2020). Later, in the 21st century, as the geopolitical centre of gravity shifted to the Indo-Pacific, India realised that passive neutrality was no longer a viable strategy for a nation aspiring to be a leading power in the dynamic world order (Pant,2020).

This transition in foreign policy from non-alignment/strategic Autonomy to "Strategic-Autonomy 2.0" shows a fundamental change in the external engagement strategy. Unlike its predecessor, which was often defensive and conditioned, strategic autonomy 2.0 is more proactive and pragmatic (Hall,2019). It admits that in an anarchic international system, power determines the hierarchy of nations. Therefore, the past hesitation of alignment is abandoned by India in favour of "Multi-Alignment" (Jaishankar, 2020).

Therefore, India adopted this carefully crafted foreign policy that explores its choices to engage with all major powers on its own terms, known as strategic autonomy 2.0. Where it maintains a remarkable balance. It has deep defence ties with Russia, which accounts for almost 36% of defence imports (Peri, 2025), and, recently, it signed the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) similar to the USA's Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) (Divya, 2025). At the same time it strengthening partnership with the USA, while engaging with China in various multilateral forums especially against western dominance and become a united voice of developing world, despite border disputes and its hegemonic character in Asia, doing all these engagements India puts its national interest at the forefront of alignment and this vary approach helped India very well when the Ukraine conflict began, it faced huge pressure to pick one sides(Patil, 2025). Moreover, it is the capability of this approach that India purchases the S-400 missile defence system from Russia while signing fundamental defence agreements like LEMOA, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) with the USA (Tellis, 2021). Through this calculated strategy, India secures tangible benefits from diverse partners without becoming a client state to any single hegemon (Mohan, 2022).

Operationalising Multi-Alignment in a Polarised World

The underpinning of India's strategic autonomy 2.0 is clearly visible in the statement given by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005, "Engagement with the United States is essential in the world that we live in…. This is not an alliance against any other country…. We are not part of any military alliance, and we are not ganging up against any country…. I wish to dispel this opinion which may exist that what we have done with the United States is at the cost of China or any other country" (Madan, 2020). The statement is clearly explicit about India's stance towards multi-alignment.

Therefore, the modus operandi of this policy of Strategic Autonomy 2.0 is "issue-based partnership" rather than ideological rigidity, because India creates coalitions best suited to its national interests (Karnad, 2018). In the maritime domain, to challenge rising China's unilateralism, India partners with the US-Japan and Australia in the Quad to ensure a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and takes part in various maritime exercises to show its collective effort (Pant & Super, 2021). To the contrary, in the continental domain, India cooperates and engages with China and Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and becomes the voice of the developing world to manage the interests of Central Asia and counter terrorism (Unnikrishnan, 2022).

Critically, this dualistic approach demonstrates India's strength and bargaining power, which is now defined by the capacity to make the best decision suited to its national interest, rather than the fear of offending a great power, as recently Prime Minister Modi's remarks over the Trump Administration's decision to additional 25% tariffs on Indian Goods on buying Russian oil, calling the tariffs "unfair, unjustified, and unreasonable"(DD News, 2025). Moreover, the refusal to condemn Russia openly during the Ukraine conflict, despite immense pressure from the West, is a prime example of this doctrine. Ultimately, India has said but in its own terms rather than fearing any country, that "it is not the era of war" (Jaishankar, 2024) and "India is not neutral. India is on the side of peace. This is not an era of war. A solution cannot be found on the battlefield" (India Today, 2025). Even keeping this in mind that our largest defence procurement comes primarily from Russia, although we decreased, but it still has 36%, and after the Ukraine conflict, it has become a major energy supplier, accounting for almost 40%, which secures India's defence and energy security (Peri, 2025). Therefore, it prioritises its defence supply and energy security over Western normative expectations, giving a sign that its strategic autonomy is non-negotiable (Bajpai,2021). Thus, the doctrine evolved from a defensive strategy(non-alignment) of

avoiding entanglement to an assertive strategy of building leverage, allowing India to be a "Swing State" that can tilt the global balance through its position (Mattoo, 2022).

Another significant implication of this policy is that recently, USA-India trade relations soured over the tariff issue, India proactively stabilised its northern front with China and adjusted its tilt towards the SCO and BRICS. Moreover, under the tactical rapprochement, India lifted the investment barriers, resumed direct international flights, and eased visa restrictions for Chinese technicians (Saran, 2025). Only due to this policy, India is able to host simultaneously the upcoming 18th BRICS Summit, a global South-led bloc and the Quad Leaders' Summit in 2026, which aligns with Western interests (Pant and Taneja, 2026). Hence, the ultimate exhibition of this policy denotes that India will act as a "stabilising pole" that cannot be pressurised into a singular alliance at the cost of its sovereign interest (Chatham House, 2025).

Seeing all these successive moves of strategic autonomy 2.0, which is celebrated as a doctrine of sovereign agency, does not mean that it lacks any limitations or challenges; and, without describing it, the paper looks unidirectional. Therefore, pursuing this policy, it had to face some consequences, which are given below:

Trust Deficits: Recently, a technology summit for semiconductors and Artificial Intelligence supply chains was organised by the USA, named "Pax Silica," where India was excluded, which serves as a potent indicator of this deficit (The Hindu Bureau, 2025). It is clear in the mind of the USA that if India is not ready to align on hard security issues like Ukraine or Taiwan, how could it be trusted on hard technology integration? This shows the "cherry-picking" partnership of the USA, where it exempts Indian pharmaceuticals from tariffs but imposes heavy duties 50% on Indian steel and textiles, effectively punishing India's strategic autonomy while exploiting its utility (ClearTax, 2025). Another example of snubbing is on January 7, 2026, when the USA announced its withdrawal from the International Solar Alliance, which signifies the weakness of India's diplomatic tactics and its trust deficits towards India, as India is the prime and founding member of this institution (Times of India, 2026).

Supply Chain Vulnerability: Despite the rhetoric of "Atmanirbhar Bharat," the data of 2025 reveals the deepening vulnerability of India, which heavily relies on China for Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs), almost 70%, and solar components, nearly 90% of its requirement (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). If the border tension arises, then China could weaponise these supplies as it had done for the USA related to rare earth minerals (Kennedy, 2025).

Multi-Alignment Fatigue: India, which simultaneously manages the Quad, BRICS, SCO and many multilateral forums, creates institutional schizophrenia, where its commitments in one forum actively undercut its credibility in another. For example, India wants to use Quad for a non-military purpose, while the USA, Japan and Australia have the vision of a hard security anti-China bloc (Chatham House, 2025). Recently, Iran became a member of BRICS, which is considered a virulent anti-Western state, where India's role as a bridge is becoming untenable, and India risks being guilty by association. Unnecessarily expanding its diplomatic capital for defending its partner's rogue behaviour rather than just advancing its own interests (Stimson Center, 2025).

The paper further analyses the advantages India gets from the USA while align to the Western powers, especially how these engagements fulfil the aspiration of India's leading power. At the same time, it fulfils the need of the hour to mitigate the assertive and hegemonic attitude of China.

The US-India Partnership –From Estrangement to Strategic Convergence

The 21st century's arguably most consequential geopolitical development is transforming the relationship between the USA and India (Madan, 2020). Historically, India and the USA have been described as 'Alienated Democracy' because during the Cold War, India adopted non-alignment while the US committed to supporting Pakistan. However, gradually things changed between the USA and India, and become comprehensive global strategic partners (Tellis, 2021). This change did not come out of cultural affinity alone but is driven by a hard-nosed realist assessment of the shared threat posed by the risk of China (Ganguly, 2022).

To counter China's hegemonic ambitions USA views India as the only Asian Power with the demographic and economic weight (Campbell, 2023). On the other hand, India recognises that it cannot fill the widening power gap with China, especially in the naval and technological spheres, without the help of America (Mohan, 2023). This ties realist partnership is the best example of "external balancing" in international relations theory, where a state aligns with a distant great power to balance a proximate threat (Pant & Saha, 2023). However, different from traditional alliances, this partnership with the USA allows India to maintain its strategic autonomy, emerging with the USA on its own terms (Jaishankar, 2020).

Foundational Agreements and Military Interoperability

The cornerstone of the USA-India partnership is the signing of four 'fundamental agreements' that have institutionalised military cooperation. The first one is the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016, which allows both militaries to use each other's bases for refuelling and replenishment (Singh, 2021). This agreement increases the reach of the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean and supports the US Navy's persistence in the region. Along with this, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018 allows India to access encrypted communication equipment on US origin platform like the P-8I Poseidon and C-130J Hercules (Kanwal,2019). Most importantly, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), signed in 2020, grants India for sharing of high-resolution geospatial intelligence (Pant, 2021). In real terms, BECA gives Indian missile and drones to target adversaries with pinpoint accuracy using USA-satellite Data – a crucial capability in the rugged

terrain of the Himalayas (Joshi, 2021). The above agreements have changed the relationship from a transactional 'buyer-seller' dynamic to one of deep 'interoperability' where the two militaries can operate seamlessly together during a crisis (Tellis, 2023).

The Technology Pivot: iCET and the future of Defence

In the sphere of defence, trade of technology plays a crucial role in creating partnerships. Because the future balance of power is totally determined by the supremacy in dual-use technology. Hence, India and the USA launched the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology in 2022 that will mark a paradigm shift in relations and the central part of this agreement to transfer 100% of technology for the GEF 414jet engine to India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) (Mohan, 2023; Sullivan, 2023). This agreement is unprecedented because the US has not shared this level of propulsion technology even with its closest allies. This shows a high degree of trust in India (Kapadia, 2024).

"Modified India" – Cooperation and Confrontation with China

Under the analysis of the triangular framework, understanding the relation of India with China is necessary. For India, China is like a double-edged sword, which it cannot ignore due to its geographical, geoeconomic and geopolitical perspectives. Despite having tensions in their bilateral relations, India and China cooperate at various regional forums, such as the SCO, BRICS, the East Asia Summit, and the trilateral Russia-India-China framework, which allows them to engage with each other constructively (Sikri, 2024). Apart from all the security-related issues, the trade volume is a record high of $ 1555.62 billion by the end of 2025, and the widening trade deficits of $116 billion show India's reliance on China for its growth engine (The Economic Times of India, 2026; PTI, 2026). However, when it comes to security-related issues, India doesn't compromise with its sovereignty and give an adequate response to China, which is reflected in its modified version.

A Modified India has moved away from the Nehruvian notion of non-alignment to skilfully play the balance of power game as a "Leading Power." Because of unresolved territorial disputes as the Doklam standoff (2017), and the Galwan valley clashes with China. Additionally, its role as the largest arms supplier to India's neighbouring countries and its nuclear submarines patrolling in the Bay of Bengal, which India considers its strategic backyard. Non-alignment is no longer a viable option for India, only to shake hands with like-minded countries (Malik, 2016). The detailed analysis of this Modified India is given below:

The Collapse of "Peace and Tranquillity"

The breakdown of India's relationship with China is the most significant driver of this strategic shift. For thirty years, bilateral relations relied on a 1993 agreement to maintain "Peace and Tranquillity" along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Through this agreement, both sides decided to separate the border dispute from the broader economic relationship (Gokhale, 2021). This collapse of agreement was irrevocable in 2020 following the Galwan Valley clashes, where Chinese incursion led to the first combat fatalities on the border in 45 years (Joshi,2021). The acceleration of "Modified India" is a direct response to this betrayal, which signifies a transition in India's strategic culture from risk aversion to "strategic reciprocity" (Pant, 2020).

Under this change strategy, the political leadership has made it clear that the "state of the border reflects the state of the relationship" (Jaishankar, 2022). India has rejected all the attempts made by China to normalise ties while maintaining forward military deployments. Instead, India has adopted a posture of "armed coexistence," authorising the mirror-deployments of 68000 troops, heavy artillery, and missile regiments to the high Himalayas to match the People's Liberation Army (PLA) movement for movement (Sawhney & Wahid, 2021). This move to "punitive deterrence" ensures that any future adventurism by China will be met with immediate and proportional kinetic force, raising the cost of aggression for the PLA (Lt. Gen. Panag, 2020).

2.2 **Infrastructure Hardening and the Vibrant Village" Program**

The rapid hardening of border infrastructure is a critical component of "Modified India" to negate the logistical advantage historically held by China. Under the Vibrant Village Program, the Ministry of Home Affairs (2023) has developed 662 border villages and accelerated the construction of strategic roads, bridges, and tunnels. These villages serve a dual purpose: first, as the forward logistics bases and surveillance nodes, and secondly, for the civilians (Singh, 2022). Furthermore, the Atal Tunnel and the ongoing construction of the Shink La Tunnel ensure all-weather connectivity to Ladakh is a strategic asset to the country, allowing the Indian Army to mobilise reserves even during harsh winters (Bambawale et al., 2021). The Ministry of Home Affairs, under the 4G saturation project, focusing on installing 20,000 towers in border areas, further enhances national security, command and control capabilities (MHA, 2024).

Economic Statecraft and Decoupling Dilemma

Beyond the military domain, "Modified India" works across domain coercion after the 2020 crisis, the Government of India banned over 300 Chinese mobile applications, including WeChat, TikTok, citing data sovereignty and National Security (Dhar, 2021). Additionally, the government restricted Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China, effectively blocking Chinese predatory acquisitions of Indian Firms (Mukherjee, 2022).

However, following this strategy, India must face a harsh reality: economic dependency. Despite all these political measures, the trade deficit with China has widened to an unmatched $ 116 billion in 2025 (PTI, 2026). India is negatively dependent on Chinese imports for solar components, Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API), electronics, and rare earth minerals (Sahoo, 2023). This

critical dependency on China limits India's offensive economic options. Consequently, to address this vulnerability over the long term, the government has launched the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme in 14 key sectors to promote domestic manufacturing (Panagariya, 2021). The strategy of 'de-risking' is not immediate decoupling, because it is suicidal for the economy, but a gradual build-up of resilience against Chinese economic coercion (Kant, 2022).

India's Response to China's Insurgency in its Neighbourhood

The Modified India has expanded its diplomatic outreach well beyond its immediate neighbours to engage distant nations like Vietnam and the Philippines that are also grappling with China's territorial assertiveness. This development from the "Look East" to the "Act East" policy aligns strategically with the USA rebalance and Japan's "Proactive Contribution to Peace." By promoting a security network that includes Mongolia, Australia, Indonesia, and Thailand, India is positioning itself as a central pillar in balancing China's rise. Furthermore, India has chosen to disregard Beijing's objections, openly backing Hanoi and Manila in their maritime disputes and maintaining its energy exploration partnerships with Vietnam in the South China Sea (Malik, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century places India at the fulcrum of the systemic rivalry between the United States and China. The paper has demonstrated that India's response to this challenge is a sophisticated evolution of its foreign policy doctrine, transitioning from the moralistic isolation of non-alignment to the pragmatic engagement of "Strategic Autonomy 2.0". By examining the "US-China-India" triangle, the paper concludes that India is not merely balancing between powers but is actively shaping the security architecture of Asia to facilitate its own rise.

The efficacy of India's multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific is not measured by its ideological purity but by its operational outcomes. The empirical evidence demonstrates that India has mastered the art of "issue-based alignment", effectively leveraging American capabilities for its security and trade with China for its growth engine without compromising its sovereignty and autonomy.

The emergence of "Modified India" signifies a permanent hardening of India's stance towards China. The era of separating border disputes from broader relations is over; instead, India is now employing a strategy of "punitive deterrence" and "strategic reciprocity," utilising military counter-mobilisation and economic tools to defend its sovereignty.

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