



Strategic Autonomy as India's Global Compass

This editorial is based on "[India's strategic autonomy in a multipolar world](#)" which was published in The Hindu on 06/09/2025. The article brings into picture India's strategic autonomy as a diplomatic necessity—engaging major powers on its own terms, reflecting principled multipolarism that is independent yet non-isolationist.

For Prelims: [SCO Summit in China](#), [Quad](#), [S-400 Air Defence System](#), [Rafale jets](#), [Voice of Global South Summit](#), [India's G20 presidency](#), [Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023](#), [Production Linked Incentive \(PLI\) scheme](#), [China Pakistan Economic Corridor](#), [SAARC](#), [Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism](#).

For Mains: Key Dimensions of India's Strategic Autonomy Approach, Major Challenges Linked to India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy.

In today's world of shifting power equations and fracturing alliances, **India's pursuit of [strategic autonomy](#) has moved from being an intellectual concept to a practical diplomatic imperative.** This approach enables India to safeguard sovereign decision-making while engaging simultaneously with major powers, the **United States, China, and Russia**, strictly on its own terms. It is neither **vassalage nor counterbalancing**, but rather a **policy of principled engagement**, where national interest takes precedence over rigid alignments. Far from isolationism, it reflects India's vision of **multipolarity**, a diplomacy with a spine, privileging **independence over dependence, and agency over alignment.**

What are the Key Dimensions of India's Strategic Autonomy Approach?

- **Multi-Alignment with Great Powers:** India practices interest-based engagement with major powers without bloc alignment, enabling strategic hedging amidst rising US-China tensions.
 - It partners with the US on Indo-Pacific and technology, while preserving deep defence ties with Russia and engaging with China in multilateral forums.
 - Despite US pressure, India abstained on UN votes on Ukraine and continued [Russian oil imports](#), now 35-40% of India's crude basket.
 - India recently participated in the [SCO Summit in China](#), advocating for a reformed, strengthened multilateralism and deepened India-Russia-China ties.
 - Simultaneously, it deepened [Quad](#) cooperation with the US, Japan, and Australia, to host the 2025 Quad Summit.
- **Autonomous Defence Capability:** India imports diverse defence equipment from various nations, including the United States for aircraft and maritime systems (e.g., [MQ-9B drones](#)), France

for fighter jets and submarines (e.g., [Rafale jets](#) and Scorpene submarines), Russia for a range of military platforms and [S-400 Air Defence System](#), and Israel for advanced defence systems like the [Barak-8 missile](#) defence system.

- Also, Strategic autonomy increasingly relies on indigenisation of defence to reduce external dependency (positive indigenization list) particularly amid geopolitical disruptions and sanction risks.
- The aim is to ensure operational flexibility and technological sovereignty in a hostile security environment.
- India's Defence Budget 2025-26 is ₹6.81 lakh crore, comprising 1.85% of GDP, with ₹1.8 lakh crore for capital outlay.

- Indigenous platforms like [Tejas LCA](#), [INS Vikrant](#), and [BrahMos](#) exports to Philippines reflect rising self-reliance.

- **Balanced Indo-Pacific Strategy:** India balances assertive Chinese posturing by building coalitions in the Indo-Pacific while avoiding formal alliances, preserving strategic flexibility.
 - It engages through minilaterals like Quad and IPEF, while retaining bilateral diplomacy with ASEAN, Australia, and France.
 - India's joint patrols with US and Australia in the Indian Ocean show operational alignment, but it refuses to militarise the Quad.
 - The [21st ASEAN-India Summit in 2024](#) reaffirmed India's centrality in ASEAN-led architecture, resisting Chinese regional hegemony.
- **Leadership of Global South:** Strategic autonomy also entails shaping a multipolar order by voicing the interests of the Global South and advocating institutional reform. India leverages its developmental narrative and digital diplomacy to offer non-Western leadership.
 - India convened the [Voice of Global South Summit \(2023\)](#), with 125 nations participating.
 - During [India's G20 presidency](#), it led to African Union's inclusion, asserting its agenda-setting power.
- **Geoeconomic Hedging:** India diversifies trade partners and investment sources to reduce dependence and resist coercive economic diplomacy, particularly from China and the West. This enables policy insulation and market access flexibility amid protectionist trends.
 - For instance, recent tariff recalibrations have accelerated India's efforts to finalize trade agreements with the European Union, while simultaneously expanding market opportunities in Latin America and Africa, further broadening its economic footprint.
- **Technology and Digital Sovereignty:** Digital strategic autonomy is crucial to navigate AI, cyber, and semiconductor geopolitics. India aims to be a rule-maker in emerging tech governance through capacity-building and global partnerships.
 - Key steps include the enactment of the [Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023](#), which establishes a robust framework for safeguarding citizens' data, and the launch of the Initiative on [Critical and Emerging Technology \(iCET\)](#) with the United States, which fosters cooperation in AI, quantum, 5G/6G, and semiconductor ecosystems.
 - India also joined the [Global Partnership on AI](#) (and set to host AI Impact Summit in 2026), and leads the India Stack adoption in Africa and Southeast Asia.
- **Issue-Based Multilateralism:** India supports multilateralism rooted in equity and sovereignty rather than bloc politics, participating in diverse groupings without ideological alignment.
 - This sustains manoeuvrability and maximises agenda control. India hosted the 2023 SCO Summit while also participating in Quad and I2U2, showcasing its "multi-platform diplomacy."
 - It has pushed for [UNSC reform](#) and WTO dispute resolution revival, with G77 and BRICS backing its UNSC permanent seat claim.
- **Resilient Economic Nationalism:** India uses Aatmanirbhar Bharat not as protectionism, but as a resilience strategy to insulate domestic interests from volatile global shocks.
 - It blends open markets with strategic industrial policy. Instead of imposing high tariffs to block imports, India's government initiated the [Production Linked Incentive \(PLI\) scheme](#). This policy offers significant financial support and incentives.
 - This strategic policy has transformed India from a net importer of mobile phones to a major exporter. **Global companies that once only served the Indian market are now using India as a base to "Make for the World,"** exporting their products from India to other countries
- **Normative Diplomacy and Value-Based Outreach:** India distinguishes itself by embedding values like pluralism, sovereignty, and mutual respect in its diplomacy not

transactional alignment. This enhances its legitimacy, especially among post-colonial and developing nations.

- India extended humanitarian assistance to Turkey despite its divergent positions on the Kashmir issue, and spearheaded the global 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Its de-hyphenated policy with [Israel-Palestine](#) and balanced Ukraine stance show ethical pragmatism.
- **Climate and Developmental Autonomy:** India resists climate conditionalities that could constrain its developmental imperatives while positioning itself as a leader in green transition. Strategic autonomy here ensures growth pathways remain nationally determined yet globally credible.
 - **India achieved 40% non-fossil installed capacity in 2021 (9 years early)** . Also, India launched [Mission LiFE](#) to promote sustainable lifestyles.
 - At the same time, India has consistently advocated for a **“phase down” of coal rather than a “phase out”**, balancing developmental needs with climate responsibility.

What are the Major Challenges Linked to India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy?

- **Geopolitical Polarisation and Pressure from Great Powers: The intensifying US-China rivalry pressures India to align, reducing its manoeuvring space.**
 - Strategic autonomy is harder when both economic and security interests are linked to rival blocs. The Ukraine conflict and Indo-Pacific tensions amplify this dilemma.
 - Despite US-India ties, Washington has pressured India to cut Russian oil imports and curb defence ties.
 - China's aggression along LAC coexists with it being India's number second trading partner, deepening the dependency dilemma.
- **Defence Dependence and Technological Gaps:** Heavy reliance on foreign defence imports limits autonomy in crisis scenarios and exposes India to sanctions or coercion. Indigenous R&D still lags in critical tech, weakening deterrence and operational independence.
 - India is the [2nd largest arms importer globally](#) (SIPRI), over 55% of weapons are still Russian-origin.
 - Despite Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) ambitions, India still lacks a reliable indigenous jet engine, delaying full-scale defence self-reliance.
- **Strategic Ambiguity in Multilateral Platforms:** While India participates in diverse groupings (Quad, SCO, BRICS), overlapping agendas and rivalries create conflicting expectations. This blurs India's positioning and draws criticism from all sides.
 - India's neutral stance on Ukraine drew Western backlash, while participation in SCO and BRICS with China raises doubts in Indo-Pacific coalitions.
 - These tensions were evident when India declined to sign the joint declaration at the **SCO Defence Ministers' meeting in Qingdao, China**.
- **Technological Dependence and Digital Vulnerabilities: India aspires for digital sovereignty but still depends on Western platforms and Chinese supply chains. This limits autonomy in tech governance and cybersecurity.**
 - India imports over 90% of its semiconductor requirements from countries like China, Taiwan, and South Korea.
 - China's dominance in [critical mineral](#) supply chains (e.g., rare earths) poses long-term vulnerability in AI and defence sectors.
- **Constraints in Regional Influence:** India's aspiration for regional primacy is challenged by China's assertiveness, Pakistan's proxy strategy, and slow regional integration. This undermines its leadership in South Asia.
 - China's BRI and [China Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#) projects run through PoK, violating India's sovereignty, yet attracting regional participation.
 - India's limited success with [SAARC](#) contrasts with China's expanding influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives via infrastructure and debt diplomacy.
- **Institutional Limitations and Policy Coherence:** Strategic autonomy needs whole-of-government coordination, but fragmented policymaking and bureaucratic inertia slow response and implementation. Lack of agility hampers India's global competitiveness.

- India's FTA negotiations with the EU are progressing slowly due to internal sectoral resistance.
- Make-in-India defence projects often face delays, cost overruns, and coordination failures between services and industry.
- **Domestic Economic Vulnerabilities:** Without robust economic strength, strategic autonomy becomes unsustainable. A large informal sector, income inequality, and fiscal stress reduce the state's capacity to act independently.
 - India's per capita GDP is just above \$2,500, far below China's \$12,000+.
 - Specific sectors face mounting external pressures: **the Indian textile industry is under threat from US tariffs**, the steel industry is vulnerable to the **EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)**, and the dairy sector struggles against stiff competition from **New Zealand**..
 - Such vulnerabilities **constrain India's bargaining power and expose fault lines in sustaining long-term strategic autonomy**.
- **Fragmented Global Governance System: The weakening of multilateralism has left India without effective institutions to amplify its strategic voice, especially on trade, tech, and security issues. Reform remains elusive.**
 - Despite wide support, India's UNSC permanent membership bid is stalled, blocked by China and lacking a P5 consensus.
 - WTO's dispute settlement system is paralysed, hurting India's ability to challenge trade coercion legally.

How can India Enhance Strategic Autonomy Without Compromising Global Integration?

- **Deepen Multi-Alignment with Strategic Convergence:** India must pursue calibrated multi-alignment by engaging major powers **across economic, security, and technological domains without falling into ideological traps**.
 - The focus should be on **strategic convergence rather than tactical bandwagoning**, ensuring flexibility in partnerships.
 - By engaging all but entangling with none, India reinforces autonomy without isolation. As the saying goes, ***"Strategic maturity lies in building bridges without burning old ones."***
- **Accelerate Indigenisation with Global Collaboration:** Self-reliance in defence, semiconductors, and AI is critical, but not through isolation, **co-development with trusted partners is the way forward**.
 - **India must create layered innovation ecosystems** to reduce vulnerabilities while leveraging global expertise.
 - By building within and collaborating without, India ensures resilience with relevance. Indeed, ***"Sovereignty is sustainable only when powered by self-sufficiency."***
- **Shape Global Norms in Emerging Technologies:** India should take a proactive role in framing **global digital rules, AI ethics, and cyber governance to move from rule-following to rule-shaping**.
 - Through platforms like **GPAI and India Stack**, it can set standards with credibility.
 - ***"In the age of algorithms, sovereignty lies in standards."*** The ability to **shape norms enhances sovereignty as much as defending borders**.
- **Promote Inclusive Regionalism Rooted in Connectivity:** India must champion open and transparent connectivity frameworks in Eurasia, the Indian Ocean, and Southeast Asia.
 - Initiatives such as **IMEC, INSTC, and Chabahar** can project cooperative leadership and provide alternatives to **China's BRI**.
 - ***"Diplomacy moves fastest when it rides on roads, rails, and cables."*** By powering connectivity through consensus, India gains a strategic multiplier.
- **Institutionalise Issue-Based Minilaterals:** India should deepen its engagement in agile minilaterals like **Quad, I2U2, and the France-UAE trilateral**.
 - These flexible platforms enable focused cooperation without the baggage of rigid alliances.
 - **Modular partnerships tailored to sectors** allow India to stay autonomous yet engaged. As the saying goes, ***"In the chessboard of geopolitics, tactical coalitions beat rigid camps."***

- **Reform Multilateralism with Indian Imprint:** India must push to **democratise institutions like the UNSC, WTO, and IMF** while simultaneously building new multilateral frameworks aligned with **Global South priorities**.
 - Its **G20 presidency and BRICS+ outreach** demonstrate this intent. Leadership today comes not from resistance but from shaping rules. Also, **“True strategic autonomy comes from shaping the world, not just surviving in it.”**
- **Craft Tech-Security-Trade Triangles:** India must adopt an integrated approach where **technology access, national security, and trade policy** are mutually reinforcing.
 - Balanced FTAs should enable market expansion without compromising domestic safeguards, while **trusted tech transfers secure critical sectors like semiconductors and AI**.
 - Building resilient digital and physical infrastructure will strengthen both economic and strategic autonomy.
 - In a multipolar world, **sovereignty lies not in isolation but in shaping interdependence**.
- **Build Trusted Supply Chain Coalitions:** India must create diversified and secure supply chains for **semiconductors, rare earths, and green technologies** with like-minded partners.
 - Transparent corridors and regional hubs enhance resilience while reducing reliance on rivals. In the 21st century, **“supply chains are the new strategic alliances.”**
- **Harness Diaspora as a Strategic Asset:** India's diaspora, spread across 207 countries, has grown to 3.43 crore, making it the largest in the world, is a vast resource for influence in business, politics, and technology.
 - Structured engagement through knowledge networks, cultural outreach, and economic partnerships can amplify India's global footprint.
 - At the same time, institutional mechanisms such as **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas** and **diaspora investment platforms** must be strengthened to convert this soft power into strategic capital.

Conclusion:

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is not about standing apart, but about standing firm on its own terms while engaging the world. It reflects a **balance between sovereignty and global integration**, resilience and cooperation. By shaping rules, building partnerships, and safeguarding national interests, India charts a confident path in a multipolar order. As **S. Jaishankar** aptly put it, **“The India Way, especially now, would be more of a shaper or decider rather than just be an abstainer.”**

Drishti Mains Question:

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is often described as a balancing act between sovereignty and global integration. Critically examine how this stance shapes India's foreign policy choices, highlighting both its strengths and limitations.

Mains:

Q. What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. (2013)

Q. “With the waning of globalization, the post-Cold War world is becoming a site of sovereign nationalism.” Elucidate. (2025)

Q. “The reform process in the United Nations remains unresolved, because of the delicate imbalance of East and West and entanglement of the USA vs. Russo-Chinese alliance.” Examine and critically evaluate the East-West policy confrontations in this regard. (2025)

