

INDIA'S 'STRATEGIC AUTONOMY': A REALITY CHECK

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



'Strategic autonomy' is defined as a state's ability to independently make its decisions – especially in its foreign relations – and adopt the preferred choices without being influenced by other states.¹ The first dimension of 'strategic autonomy' concerns with a state's interactions, preferences, decisions, and practices of foreign policy and the second is connected to security and defense-related policies.² The most prominent examples of international relations actors that adopted and implemented the concept of 'strategic autonomy' in their foreign and security policy are the European Union (EU), France, and India.

However, in the recent times, the concept of 'strategic autonomy' is being contested. It is considered more of a defensive strategy of the yesteryear due to inevitability and desirability of partnerships in an increasingly interdependent world.³ Also, in terms of *realpolitik*, 'strategic autonomy' is not a rigid concept of staying non-aligned in a bipolar or an increasingly divided multipolar world; rather it is a smart strategy to position a state for better bargaining – with accruing maximum benefits.⁴ Concerning the EU's 'strategic autonomy', this became more evident in 2022 when Germany assumed the presidency of the Council of the EU. In July 2022 while delivering an

1 "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023: From Concept to Capacity", *Think Tank European Parliament*, July 8, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589)

2 Ibid.

3 Jose Ignacio Torreblanca, "Onwards and Outwards: Why the EU Needs to Move from Strategic Autonomy

4 Ume Farwa, "Europe's Rifts Strain Hopes for Strategic Power", *Asia Times*, July 16, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/europes-rifts-strain-hopes-for-strategic-power/>

address at the EU, the then German Chancellor, Angela Merkel charted a new path for the EU's 'strategic autonomy'. She urged the Council to build its defense instead of relying on Washington. She also discussed the option to engage in a strategic partnership with China and develop relations with Russia and Middle-Eastern countries from a new perspective.⁵ France shares the same vision.⁶

Recurring Theme in Indian Foreign Policy

Given this, it is argued that the term 'strategic autonomy' cannot be analyzed in isolation from IR theories. In other words, a state's foreign policy paradigm defines and provides the lens to understand its framework of 'strategic autonomy'. The concept of 'strategic autonomy' cannot be understood in isolation from a state's ideological paradigm. The same is the case with India. New Delhi's framework of 'strategic autonomy' –both theoretical and practical – evolved with the vicissitude of internal and external spheres.

The concept of 'strategic autonomy' has its roots deep in the times of independence when India gained freedom from British colonialists. Soon after independence as an aftermath of great power rivalry, the world was divided into two camps – the U.S.-led Capitalist bloc and the Soviet-led Communist bloc. The Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru set the foundation of Indian 'strategic autonomy' when he decided to remain non-aligned and not to join any bloc. However, it did not imply that India was not to forge partnerships and enter into alliances – formal or informal – with other states. By remaining non-allied-ally, India aimed at gaining as much as it could from partnerships and alliances without hurting its national interest and compromising its freedom to make its own decisions, i.e., 'strategic autonomy'.

Infusing Hindutva into 'Strategic Autonomy'

Since the advent of Bhartayia Janta Party (BJP)'s leader, Mr. Narendra Modi, a new *weltanschauung* (worldview) was infused into Indian foreign policy. This worldview is based on the philosophy of *Hindutva*, which is aimed at reviving the old glory of 'Hindustan' and making India a great Hindu power. While navigating the unprecedented challenges of an ever-changing world, the Modi government reoriented *Hindutva* on the foreign front. It is exactly where India's conceptualization of 'strategic autonomy' experienced a dramatic shift.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Emanuel Martin, "Macron and the European Strategic Autonomy Trope", *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, June 14, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/strategic-autonomy/>

Unlike his predecessors, PM Modi entered into collective strategic and economic partnerships with major powers.⁷ He pursued 'strategic autonomy', on the one hand, by becoming a part of U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and, on the other, by formally joining a China- and Russia-led initiative in the Eurasian region, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Russia-India-China (RIC). Earlier in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, QUAD was initiated as a loose partnership among the U.S., India, Australia, and Japan to provide humanitarian assistance.⁸ However, in 2017, when the Trump administration adopted a tough anti-China policy and the Modi government embroiled in a military standoff with China at Doklam, QUAD was resurrected as a pivot in the Indian Ocean region to counter China.⁹

Despite being a part of QUAD and the 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy, India maintained its 'strategic autonomy' and kept buying Russian oil when the U.S. and EU imposed massive and unprecedented sanctions on Moscow. Both the U.S. and EU states vehemently criticized New Delhi for importing oil from Russia. The High Representative for EU's Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell threatened "to stop importing the Indian products that use Russian oil."¹⁰ He also urged the EU to crack down on the Indian imports.¹¹ To this, the External Affairs Minister, Dr. Jaishankar told the EU that India was entitled to make its independent choices and it was Europe that was the biggest importer of Russian petroleum products.¹² He went even further and accused Europe of maintaining double standards and discriminating India for its choices.¹³

At the same time, India did not support the Russian stance on the Ukraine conflict. In the SCO Summit 2022, PM Modi publicly upbraided Russia, insisting that "today's era is not the era of wars"

7 Mathieu Droin et al, "France and India: Two Nuances of 'Strategic Autonomy'", *Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/france-and-india-two-nuances-strategic-autonomy#:~:text=Strategic%20Autonomy%20in%20the%20Modi%20and%20Macron%20Era&text=Modi%20has%20pursued%20autonomy%20by,States%2C%20France%2C%20and%20Japan.>

8 "What is the QUAD, and How Did it Come about", *The Guardian*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/24/what-is-the-quad-and-how-did-it-come-about>

9 Ibid.

10 "EU to Curb Indian Fuel Imports Made with Russian Oil", *Al Jazeera*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/16/eu-to-curb-indian-fuel-imports-made-with-russian-oil-report#:~:text=Josep%20Borrell%2C%20the%20European%20Union's,amid%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine.>

11 "Financial Times – EU Urged to Crackdown on Imports of Indian Fuels Made with Russian Oil", *the European Union*, May 16, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/financial-times-eu-urged-crack-down-imports-indian-fuels-made-russian-oil_en

12 "Jaishankar Schools EU for Warning India over Russian Oil", *The Hindustan Times*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/videos/news/jaishankar-schools-eu-for-warning-india-over-russian-oil-re-sale-check-regulation-watch-101684303582220.html>

13 Ibid.

and that “Putin should move onto a path of peace.”¹⁴ In the recent 5-day visit to Russia, the Indian External Minister maintained the same position.¹⁵ In fact, the conceptualization of ‘strategic autonomy’ is not just a strategy or policy set in stone for India but a crafty tool for maneuvering in the contemporary changing world. To this end, the Modi government made the resurgence of India its top priority and enacted a tripod of “Act Asia, Indo-Pacific Maritime cooperation, and Make in India” in the foreign policy.¹⁶ It is this tripod of policy that is functional in the guise of much-hyped ‘strategic autonomy.’ This new shift has been explained at length by India’s External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar.

‘India Way’ in a World in Disorder

In his book, “The India Way: Strategies in an Uncertain World”, Dr. Jaishankar revealed that the current government will rely on *realpolitik* and exploit the global contradictions to its benefit.¹⁷ He also argued that the previous governments missed the chances by clinging to the old political romanticism that needs to be done away with.¹⁸ From this perspective, ‘strategic autonomy’ is not just a narrowly defined concept of political romanticism but also a crafty tool of Hindutva *realpolitik* in a world drifting towards multipolarity.

For instance, India’s relations with the U.S. underwent a significant change in Modi’s regime. The previous governments in New Delhi restrained themselves from pursuing strategic alignment with the U.S. However, the Modi government – while holding the banner of ‘strategic autonomy’ high – not only entered into strategic partnership with the U.S. but also redefined and broadened the scope of bilateral relations. The ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy, the QUAD, and the U.S.-India defense partnership to counter China¹⁹ are a few examples.

Between Devil and the Deep Sea?

India’s repositioning came in the backdrop of China’s increasing economic clout and the Russian resurgence in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. These evolving global and regional dynamics pushed

¹⁴ Sumit Ganguly, “Why Did Modi Push back on Putin?”, *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/22/modi-putin-russia-ukraine-war-india-sco/>

¹⁵ “In Moscow to Meet Putin and Lavrov, India’s Foreign Minister Praises Growing Trade”, *APNews*, December 28, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-india-foreign-minister-ukraine-e39aabc4ca459cd11efac6b1027572a>

¹⁶ Ji, Yeon-Jung, “Strategic Partnership under the Modi Government”, *Indian Studies*, 20, 1, (2015), pp: 103-150. <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE06349777>

¹⁷ S. Jaishankar, “*The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*”, (India: Harper Collins India, 2022), pp: 3-7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Damein Cave, “U.S. Pursues Defense Partnership with India to Deter Chinese Aggression”, *The New York Times*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/17/world/asia/india-us-defense.html>

the international system into a transition phase where new re-alignments emerged. With the intent to pursue changes in the world order, Beijing and Moscow came into a close embrace. India, too, is an aspirant of a new type of world order with a prominent seat at the global forums. India's push for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is a case in point.²⁰

It is exactly where India faces a catch-22 situation: It needs its partners, especially major powers, to shape a multipolar global order to suit its interests and that, too, without relying on any of the major powers.

India is unable to secure a permanent seat at the UNSC without the consent of the permanent members – including China.²¹ While in the face of a Sino-Russia partnership, it is difficult for India to fully exploit the global contradiction. For instance, in the last G20 Summit, Moscow and Beijing formed a joint front to block any statement condemning Russia being made a part of the joint communique.²² However, to assuage the West's tough stance on Russia, New Delhi used economic connectivity as a bargaining chip. It initiated a new economic project, the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).²³ For an economically beleaguered West, it employed its economic charm and the Ukraine issue was shelved.²⁴

India applies the same approach towards Sino-Russia partnerships and looks for differences to exploit them in their interest. At SCO forum, it is using economic connectivity to drive a wedge among its members. India has urged the SCO members to support International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) instead of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁵ Here, again, India is the odd one out as it is the only member of SCO that does not support BRI. Recently, India urged the

²⁰ P.S. Jayaramu, "Time to push for a permanent seat at the UNSC", *Deccan Herald*, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/time-to-push-for-a-permanent-seat-at-the-unsc-2709749>

²¹ Karan Mehrishi, "India Can Get Permanent Security Council Seat by Outwitting Sun Tzu", *Nikkei Asia*, October 13, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/India-can-get-permanent-Security-Council-seat-by-outwitting-Sun-Tzu>

²² Bhuvan Krishna, "G20 Summit: Here's How Prime Minister Modi's Team Forged Consensus on Contentious Ukraine Issue", *Swarajya Mag*, September 11, 2023, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/g20-summit-hereshow-prime-minister-modis-team-forged-consensus-on-contentious-ukraine-issue>

²³ Ume Farwa, "Demystifying India's Multilateral Diplomacy and Achievements in G-20 Summit 2023", *ISSI*, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/IB_Farwa_Oct_24_2023.pdf

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "EAM Jaishankar calls on SCO nations to strictly adhere to principles of international law, respecting sovereignty of each other", *The Indian Express*, October 26, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/eam-jaishankar-calls-on-sco-nations-to-adhere-to-principles-of-international-law-respecting-sovereignty-9000432/>

SCO member states to make IMEC a part of the connectivity projects of SCO.²⁶ While the feasibility of IMEC is being questioned, the INSTC is still a pipeline dream.²⁷

In the BRICS Summit 2023 too, while China and Russia shared the same vision for an emerging world order, India stood out due to its different approach.²⁸ Both Moscow and Beijing intended to expand BRICS as a non-western grouping and no invitation was extended to any Western country either.²⁹ New Delhi criticized the expansion process and raised its concerns.³⁰ Despite that, the expansion of BRICS took place and it became BRICS Plus. It is the same transactionalism that dented its credibility as a partner of the U.S. against China.³¹

Conclusion

As the contemporary world is beset by the climate crisis, global financial slump, and intense major power rivalry, pursuing 'strategic autonomy' in ideal terms is not possible anymore. In a world that is increasingly becoming interdependent and where the global order is in disorder, the need for partnerships and alliances for collective good has become more than necessary. It is this deflection point in the international system that poses the real challenge to India's recent foreign policy choices and preferences which are being pursued under the slogan of 'strategic autonomy'. By practicing independence in its foreign relations, India has made it clear that its foreign relations are issue-based instead of relying on one major power only. Though this transactionalism has helped India maintain its 'strategic autonomy', it has raised doubts about India being a credible partner. Due to prevailing transactionalism, India is confronted with a security dilemma and suffers from a lack of real partners in the international system. Soon, India will realize that, in a world in disorder where interdependencies are unavoidable, partnerships are not only inevitable but desirable as well.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nima Khorrami, "INSTC: Pipeline Dream or a Counterweight to Western Sanctions and China's BRI", *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/instc-pipeline-dream-or-a-counterweight-to-western-sanctions-and-chinas-bri/>

²⁸ Hung Tran, "China and India are at Odds over BRICS Expansion", The Atlantic Council, August 8, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/china-and-india-are-at-odds-over-brics-expansion/>

²⁹ Ume Farwa, "BRICS Summit 2023, the Growing Divide between East and West: Assessing India's Position", ISSI, September 20, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-brics-summit-2023-the-growing-divide-between-east-and-west-assessing-indias-position/>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ashley J. Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India", *The Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>