

Swinging for Self-help: India's Quest for Resilience in a Fragmented Global Order

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Abstract

The reverberations caused by the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Iran and the widening rift between the US and China have added to the geopolitical turbulence. Given the economic and technological interdependence, even great powers can't make everyone dance to their tune. Navigating this complex maze, the rising powers have emerged as crucial swing states with their growing economic clout and diplomatic influence. Through their pragmatic, coalition-building skills, they are beginning to shape the global landscape while preserving their strategic autonomy. Multialignment thus has become a preferred modus operandi for these countries to find their way in a fragmented global order. This paper discusses India's expanding outreach towards diverse set of players to maximise benefits as well as generate meaningful collective action on pressing issues of global governance. It is recalibrating its foreign policy by investing in selective and issue-based partnerships on critical areas pertaining to trade, energy, environment, health, technology etc. It remains committed to the cause of reformed multilateralism and leading Global South's advocacy for a more inclusive solutions to transnational challenges. At the same time, in an uncertain environment, India is not shying away to swing between the West and the Rest.

Keywords: India, Global Order, Great Power Competition, Geopolitics, Swing State

Introduction

The post-1945 global order, having lasted for a good period in history, faces turbulence as its economic foundations are under strain and winds of change have uprooted the long-held bastions of power. The world is standing at a cusp of transition, characterised by an increasingly protectionist and inward-looking US, a hyper-revisionist Russia and an assertive China.

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Against the backdrop of intensifying geopolitical rivalries, the Global South has re-emerged as a salient category challenging power, ideological, normative and knowledge asymmetries in the world. The category offers a site of resistance and strategic autonomy to states who want a greater share in decision-making and a more inclusive global governance. For these countries, the 'rules-based international order' offers a safety valve to protect their interests, values and a standard operating procedure to navigate in an unpredictable and uncertain multipolar world. Moreover, China's ascendancy as a global superpower has stirred up a hornet's nest on the possible ramifications of the 'Beijing Consensus'. This has led to an increased preference for club-model of governance by getting like-minded partners on board to forge consensus on some of the pressing issues. While reforming multilateralism will remain a daunting task with competing narratives, great power rivalries and geopolitical contest. However, it would be interesting to explore the discourses and strategies that swing states are using to shape the broader landscape. Countries such as India, Brazil and Indonesia have emerged as crucial stakeholders in the global trade and investment regime with their expanding scope of interests, and could decisively steer the trajectory of the global order.

The intractable challenges emanating from multiple sources such as economic fallout of the pandemic, deteriorating climate, ongoing wars in Ukraine and Iran and a growing propensity towards economic nationalism has driven states to devise self-help strategies that would help them sail through rough waters. In this context, the paper explores India's quest to stay resilient and relevant in a world of shifting alliances and geopolitical uncertainty. It aspires to lead the process of making global governance a more level-playing field by playing the role of a bridging power and through its pursuit of a multi-vector foreign policy (Jaishankar, 2020). The paper argues that New Delhi is carefully crafting partnerships and friendships to balance its developmental needs and security concerns. While mounting economic volatility and regional instability have led it to diversify its outreach, signing more free trade agreements and engaging more closely with platforms like QUAD; it also remains steadfast in its commitment to reformed and inclusive multilateralism and a more equitable distribution of power.

A wide-variety of terms have been used to describe these countries - swing states, rising powers, emerging economies, pivot states, fence-sitters (Spektor, 2023). The paper uses these terms interchangeably to describe a category of states, which are although different on many fronts but have a common concern of not being identified as auxiliary powers to bigger players

(Saari et. al. 2023). They are using transactional diplomacy as a concerted strategy to achieve their objectives and refuse to be arm-twisted or hoodwinked by the great-power competition.

The Maze Runners and Shifting Sands of Geopolitics

The pandemic ushered in a new normal that eludes the classic understanding of international system. There is growing normative contestation around notions like sovereignty, statehood, nationalism etc. in a multiplex world (Acharya, 2017). Emergence of new social forces and alternative norms and values call for developing novel theoretical frameworks to comprehend this maze and the order that makes it navigable. The supply chain vulnerability compounded by irreversible changes in global ecology and technological transformations have compelled states to adopt strategies like nearshoring, decoupling and de-risking to mitigate geoeconomic risks. A faltering global institutional architecture amidst weaponised interdependence has led to a scramble for untapped geographies and a slew of connectivity projects.

The hybrid nature of contemporary conflicts, the unforeseen challenge posed by Artificial Intelligence and the looming climate and energy crisis have made the traditional statecraft outmoded. The US-China confrontation may bring back memories of great-power politics of the Cold War days but neither of them is in a position to write the rules of the game. The US might impose sanctions and threaten punitive action, leveraging its economic and military might, but it doesn't enjoy the hegemonic status of the past. China remains an all-round formidable force to counter but would not have an easy going owing to its authoritarian system, and Russia despite its waning power has managed to pose a credible threat to Europe's neighbourhood. Unlike the Cold War period, where the option was either to be aligned or non-aligned, today's international politics presents a far more complex maze testing conventional theories and concepts in International Relations.

So, amidst this uncertainty and instability, what has emerged is an influential category of the swing states which are being courted by US, China and Europe to gain an edge in the new great game. These rising powers have managed to consolidate their positions using diplomatic and economic heft and wield far greater agency today, influencing global geopolitics and creating new power dynamics (Kupchan, 2023). Countries like India, Brazil and Indonesia by virtue of their strategic locations and regional leadership are likely to play a crucial role in decisively influencing the trajectory of global order (Fontaine and Kliman, 2013). Moreover, the emerging powers have the experience of managing ethnically and ideologically diverse cultural settings

and protracted conflicts. Bracing against their odds posed by internal challenges and global structural transformations, they have managed to script a story of resounding economic success and political gravitas. These states, although belonging to an amorphous bunch, are turning out to be key players in shaping the agenda for global governance and hold the potential to encourage a 'creative' politics of global order-building (Ikenberry, 2024). Diversity and heterogeneity are a key imperative of order building (Reus Smit, 2017). The West too is acknowledging their arrival and presence and therefore, will have to engage these states meaningfully as co-participants towards making global governance more inclusive. From long being rule-recipients, playing a second fiddle or simply being fence-sitters, these states are voicing their opinion and charting an independent course of action on a case-to-case basis. An issue-based foreign policy is helping them manoeuvre and navigate a complex terrain. In this context, the choice of mutlialignment (Hall, 2016) is a careful strategy to stand one's ground and have the strategic autonomy to secure one's interests. Anarchy as the defining logic or organizing principle of the international system constrains the choices available to states and dictates them to behave rationally. They adopt strategies like balancing, bandwagoning and hedging depending upon their capabilities. In today's multipolar world, these swing states are playing more smartly by diversifying their options through multiple partnerships, coalition building, even aligning with great powers on occasions. This comes as a conscious approach favoured by their enhanced diplomatic influence and standing. It is not just a politics of survival or short-term strategic thinking in an anarchical environment, but also a strategic move on how to stay relevant, resilient and revise the status-quo.

The Russia-Ukraine war has driven a wedge not just among Washington's closest allies but also between the West and the Rest. What became a rallying point during the G20 summits held in 2023 and 2024 at New Delhi and Rio de Janeiro respectively, was to highlight the humanitarian costs of the war and its grave implications on food security and global economy. While the invasion did constitute a violation of international law, it failed to elicit a coherent response, with many countries unequivocally preferring to stay neutral. The western narrative of playing the war as one between democracies and autocracies couldn't bring everyone on board in support of sanctioning Russia. For Global South, it wasn't an easy choice to make, but unlike the past when there was lesser room for dissent, today there is a space to assert. The pursuit of mutlialignment gives flexibility to enter into constructive partnerships with no strings attached and welcoming trade and investments while maintaining southern sovereignty.

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is however is facing a litmus test over the crisis in Iran. As the war expands to the wider Gulf region, New Delhi is finding it tough to navigate through a complex web of relations: dependence on American and Israeli technology, finance and defence; importance of Iran for energy and connectivity through Chabahar and economic and strategic connections with the Gulf states through investments, trade and the livelihoods of millions of Indian workers (Gururaj, 2026). Although, India is not severely hurt as the two economies have distanced much in the last few years under Washington's sanctions with practically zero energy imports from Iran since 2019 (Bhardwaj, 2026). However, the war-induced economic fluctuations and disruption of energy flows caused by the closure of Straits of Hormuz have escalated the costs and risks for India with surge in oil prices and shortage of gas supplies. Domestic constraints and limits of its regional activism reduces room for manoeuvring as India's interests lie in securing its interests without getting entangled in the West Asian conflict and is therefore preferring "prudence over posturing" (Tharoor, 2026).

India's Multi-pronged Strategy: Exploring the 'roads' less-travelled

C. Raja Mohan described India as a 'swing state' while writing for Foreign Affairs in 2006. He attributed India's ability to shape global outcomes on the most critical issues of the twenty-first century, to the country's burgeoning economic prowess and its culturally vibrant and multi-ethnic democracy outside of the geographic West (Raja Mohan, 2006). As the world gets embroiled in the US-China rivalry and future of international order remains in doldrums due to fraying consensus, India has managed to carve out an influential space and emerged as a prominent voice of Global South. In 2022, India took over the G20 presidency at a critical juncture when the world confronted geopolitical uncertainty, economic volatility and risks related to public health, climate change and resource scarcity. A significant achievement was to bring African Union as a member of G20, a move that was hailed widely to bolster southern solidarity. Pitching for reformed multilateralism, India has demonstrated alacrity to forge new partnerships based on complementarity of interests. It is carefully watching the growing Russia-China collusion and is indeed anxious about this development. However, its best bet to wade through the ongoing structural power shifts, is not put all eggs in one basket. It is investing in a foreign policy and security strategy that seeks to exploit opportunities created by global contradictions (Jaishankar, 2020). To secure its defence needs, it has diversified its arms supplies from France, Israel and Sweden while continuing to have a robust defence cooperation with Russia. At the same time, India after initial reluctance, has endorsed Quad to address

security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and uphold a rules-based maritime order. India continues to engage with China through forums like BRICS, BASIC and SCO. It is a deliberate strategy to neither antagonize China through Quad nor to be labelled as anti-West by participating in the BRICS (Raja Mohan, 2022). It has been described as ‘evasive balancing’ employing contradictory elements that defy neat categorization of balancing or hedging (Rajagopalan, 2020). Facing multifarious challenges, strategic autonomy has delivered rich dividends for India. The world understood New Delhi walking the diplomatic tightrope and its hesitation to call out Russia for the attack on Ukraine. It however did not mean mincing words as the official position continues to call for respecting national borders, diplomatic engagement and cessation of hostilities. Moreover, despite Western sanctions on Russia, India continued its crude oil and military equipment imports from Moscow to secure its energy needs. However, in August 2025, the Trump administration mounted further pressure on New Delhi by announcing additional 25% tariff on Indian purchase of discounted Russian oil. India eventually negotiated an interim trade deal with the US in February 2026, agreeing on 18% tariff rate which was further brought down to 10% by a US Supreme Court ruling (Goswami, 2026).

South Asia remains an Achilles heel in India’s strategic calculations. With two nuclear-armed adversaries in close proximity with a credibility to surprise and escalate a crisis, India is also mindful of security threats from China and Pakistan which makes it strike a fine balance between US, Russia and China to secure its own regional interests. However, while responding to national security threats, India has demonstrated an assertive projection of its military might which illustrates a certain decisiveness and confidence. The counter-offensive strikes launched in the aftermath of the April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack, reflects a new point of inflection in its strategic posturing which means reducing foreign dependence; not just for military supplies but also making prompt SOS calls to seek great power mediation and intervention in conflict management. India rather declined Trump’s offer to mediate on the issue and the eventual ceasefire was accomplished on a bilateral basis, albeit facilitated by the US. The Quad’s reticence to support New Delhi on the matter is perplexing as the bloc is meant to counterbalance China. This unreliability of securing a partner or ally’s support during testing times has made India think afresh and focus on strengthening its own position.

It has thus not only deepened cooperation with other states to augment its military capabilities but also invested in defence indigenization to achieve self-reliance. The recent episode in the India-Pakistan conflict has revealed the conundrum of evolving geopolitical dynamics,

signalling a shift in India's self-perception and choices as it confronts the dilemma of a rising power. It is therefore rolling the dice in every possible direction from where it can reap benefits that add to its international stature.

For it to be seen as a credible and capable partner, India will need to come up with narratives and frameworks that serve to revive the fractured multilateralism. Protectionist policies, tariff shocks have led states scout for alternate systems as a bulwark against heightened economic fluctuations and disruptions. As new spheres of influence emerge into financial, economic, and technological realms, transcending territorial borders; India has positioned itself as potential pivot and stabilizing force between competing blocs (Bhowmick, 2025). It is uniquely poised to shape global realignments through a sustained diplomatic effort and dialogue, leveraging economic resilience anchored in strategic autonomy. Its stability, strategic flexibility, enormous market potential and positive growth projections provide a safe haven for investments amidst this geopolitical churning.

India has also gained traction for its efforts towards shaping a more just and equitable global climate order. The rising powers of Global South have a notable role to play in global environmental governance with their expanding economies. Their participation is crucial on international climate policies relating to carbon sequestration and deforestation. As countries race up to achieve a net zero or carbon neutral status, India's own quest towards green energy transition requires active climate diplomacy through platforms like International Solar Alliance. To meet its ambitious climate targets and sustainability goals, India is also making a dedicated outreach to the Nordic region to leverage from their expertise in green innovation and critical niche technologies. Here too, India managed to put its best foot forward by becoming the only country in the world to sign a Green Strategic Partnership with Denmark.

An interesting development to watch out will be to what extent Russia and China align forces? While their no-limits partnership speaks volumes about the intent, especially, in the current context of the Ukraine war, it still doesn't give a clear picture about how the two revisionist powers will bargain with other rising powers or within the BRICS block to consolidate their growing proximity. The expansion of BRICS and entry of Indonesia, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates is also noteworthy as it gives more power to the countries resisting Western dominance by embracing networked multilateralism and bolstering cooperation on issues of common interest like from energy security, climate change, health and technology transfer (Patrick et. al. 2025). However, this unity of purpose and pursuit of self-help doesn't

not necessarily mean upending the current global order, rather it aims to continue a beneficial engagement with the West while asking for a level-playing field.

Also, what would this possibly mean for countries like India which have managed to offset the negative externalities arising out of the current crises? India has therefore unequivocally stated that it is not 'anti-West' (Jaishankar, 2024), rather it recognizes that a strong partnership with West is needed to advance mutual interests (Hall, 2025). New Delhi therefore, is not enthusiastic about supporting an alternative currency or de-dollarization, while advocating for a revamped international financial architecture (Tellis, 2025). However, this balancing act in a geopolitical disorder is going to be far from easy. China's growing economic footprint is unmatched and would continue to overshadow India's soft power capabilities. India's supply-chain dependence on China in areas of critical and emerging technology also poses limits on its developmental ambitions and material influence (Bajpae and Ji, 2025). Post-Galwan, the security dilemma has been exacerbated with both countries augmenting military capabilities and focusing on consolidation of territory rather than prioritising political dialogue (Verma, 2024). India-China relations remain embroiled in differing perceptions and positions and the contemporary geopolitical dynamics are going to exacerbate this zero-sum game (Josukutty and Reem, 2025).

Nonetheless, India remains categorical about leading Global South's development aspirations and shaping the global agenda reflective of new norms and priorities. India's growing penchant for transactional diplomacy and fine-balancing between the West with the Rest would be a critical feature of the future global order. Moreover, this is not going to be a binary contest between the US versus the revisionist powers and involves multiple poles of influence (Bhowmick, 2025). In a fragmented global order, like every other state, India too would swing to help itself reduce risks and maximise returns from the ongoing competition. Selective and issue-based engagement with partners of its choice would be New Delhi's strategy to manage the asymmetric distribution of power and doing all this by retaining its strategic autonomy.

Going by the current trajectory of India's foreign policy, there is not going to be a drastic departure from its aim to stabilize and uphold the rules-based order. Whether there will be tweaking of the existing architecture or if there will be consensus achieved over deeper reforms, will be determined by the bargain between rule-makers and rule-takers. The latter of course are aspiring to be rule-shapers, and some of them have even made it to the hot seat. The reassertion of economic nationalism and contest over spheres of influence complicates this ambitious task,

especially when Trump continues to throw surprises and makes it an even more unpredictable state of affairs. A bumpy ride could be made smoother by cushioning against shocks through domestic capacity building. That's precisely what India is striving to achieve through its imaginative diplomacy, to fill the gaps in defence, economic, technological, environmental domains by collaborating with states with diverse expertise.

Conclusion

In times of geopolitical and structural uncertainties and the growing weaponisation of dependencies by different states, India is striving to carve a balance between maintaining a non-disruptive relation with major players in the international system, and, sustaining its strategic autonomy. Unless compelled to be decisive, New Delhi remains vigilant and engaged but not overtly interventionist. In a fast-changing strategic landscape, India's BRICS presidency in 2026 is going to further test its diplomatic astuteness in balancing the West and the Rest. The persistent threat of cross-border terrorism, an assertive China and the West's diplomatic pressure, economic coercion could constrain India's strategic flexibility. Exercising strategic autonomy under current conditions of fragmentation requires navigating through uncertainties by making choices that offset costs related to market fluctuation, supply chain and diplomatic posturing, to the extent possible. In order to avoid taking sides in an era of emerging great-power competition, India has adopted "return-maximizing" and "risk-mitigating" measures like economic diversification, indirect-balancing and dominance-denial (Kara, 2025). An economy of that scale being a dominant manufacturing hub with its skilled workforce and a safe investment climate, India, despite its own domestic challenges, managing the world's largest population with limited resources, still appears to be in a bright spot.

The war fatigue and ensuing economic losses may arrest the selfish tendencies for a while. However, new crises will keep erupting and the self-help mantra will never be outmoded. The future global order will continue to be dynamic where on one hand, technologies break territorial barriers and on the other, borders continue to hold salience. The global ecosystem dependent on supply chain and technological resilience, has introduced new vulnerabilities and thus, strategic autonomy needs to translate into strategic influence (Subbarao, 2026). Europe is reckoning the new reality of doing it alone and will focus on increased defence spending to remain militarily prepared against the Russian threat. Similarly, with Quad lacking strategic coherence, the possibility of a reliable offshore balancer in the Indo-Pacific looks bleak. States will have to resort to hedging against China to maintain the equilibrium.

Addressing the intractable global challenges will require greater pragmatism and commitment. India has managed to showcase itself as that practical and reliable partner for many amidst a turbulent geopolitical landscape. While the proxy wars, tariff blackmails and restructuring of supply chains to de-stabilize the region would go on, and so would India's quest to stay resolute and resilient.

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