



From strategic autonomy to minilateralism: reassessing India's Indo-Pacific strategy in a changing geopolitical order

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ABSTRACT

The Indo Pacific has become the major theatre of current geopolitical rivalry, driven by China's growing influence, maritime rivalry and the increasing strategic alignment of regional powers. In this evolving landscape, India must strengthen its security ties with its partners like the United States, Japan and Australia, while also maintaining the strategic partnership with Russia and preserving strategic autonomy as its core foreign policy principle. This paper identifies that India's Indo-Pacific policy is not a shift towards formal alliance politics, but a readjustment of autonomy through flexible and issue-based cooperation. India also seeks to deepen security cooperation in the framework of minilaterals like the Quad through avoiding binding alliance commitments. The study demonstrates that New Delhi has adopted a strategy of selective alignment that enable it to balance security imperatives with independent decision making. The paper conceptualises that by moving beyond the traditional autonomy or the alignment; India's approach is a form of flexible alignment that reflects behaviours of middle powers within an increasingly multipolar and fragmented international order.

Key Words: *Indo-Pacific; Strategic autonomy; Quad; Flexible alignment; Minilateralism; Middle powers; International order.*

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become the main battleground of global geopolitical competition. It is a large maritime region in which the traditional great power system of the 20th century is being challenged by the emerging power structure of the 21st century (Cannon & Rossiter, 2018). The region is not simply geographic construct, but it is also a region of intense economic interdependence and growing security dilemmas, primarily due to the increasing competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The great power rivalry has reshaped the Indo-Pacific region from a facilitator of global trade to a

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region of contested space where territorial disputes, military buildup and anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities have become a reality (Fong, 2024, ; Randev, 2022; Singh, 2013). Unlike the rigid bipolarity of the cold war, the contemporary Indo-Pacific is characterised by overlapping interests and a more complex strategic environment in which middle powers must navigate the pressures of great power competition. In this changing context, the emergence of China and its more assertive maritime approach alongside growing concerns over norms such as freedom of navigation, has forced regional countries to change their security strategies (Doyle & Rumley, 2019).

Within this evolving theatre of great power rivalry, India has become a key leading power with proactive Indo-Pacific vision. Indian engagement is no longer confined to the immediate subcontinental periphery, but has expanded through a strong maritime strategy which emphasizes a free, open and inclusive regional order (Kim, 2024,). This change can be seen in policy documents like the Act East Policy and the recently expanded Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) into Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MHASAGAR) which reflects India's strategic outreach from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific Ocean (Yadav, 2025). Rather than conventional reactive stance, the shift in New Delhi's policy is more proactive and is meant to influence the security architecture of the region. This is reflected through its developing strategic maritime infrastructure such as the Sabang port in Indonesia, the Agelega island facilities in Mauritius as well as in the institutionalization of White Shipping Information Agreements with regional partners. These are part of a reorientation in India's strategic consciousness to expand maritime domain awareness (MDA), connectivity and regional influence, that recognises the country's developmental trajectory as intertwined with the stability of Indo-Pacific maritime corridors (Mishra, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2024).

However, India's increasing engagement in Indo-Pacific region has brought a dilemma in its foreign policy to the forefront, namely the contradiction between its foundational principle of strategic autonomy and the growing need of security cooperation with new allies. Historically, strategic autonomy allowed India to maintain independent decision making and not to entangled in formal security pacts like NATO and WARSAW (Akbar, 2026; Donald, 2024). Yet, the rise of China as an asymmetric threat has forced New Delhi to seek greater security cooperation with the U.S. and its partners, most notably through minilateral frameworks such as Quad (Peters, 2025).

This changing stance raises the question as to how is India deepening security ties without giving up strategic autonomy? Realist approaches particularly Balance of Threat theory would predict a shift toward formal alliance formation in response to rising threats (Stephen Walt, 1987). From an offensive realist perspective, John Mearsheimer (2001) similarly contends that states, operating

under anarchy, are driven to enhance their security through strategic alignments (Mearsheimer, 2001). While autonomy centric perspectives would expect continued distance from such arrangements. India's behaviour, however, reflects neither outcome, but instead suggests a more complex strategic logic. This paper argues that India is not undergoing a linear shift towards formal alignment, but is instead; reconfiguring strategic autonomy to operate within an increasingly minilateral security architecture. In doing so, it secures alignment like benefits without incurring the institutional costs of formal alliances.

Defining the concept of strategic autonomy and minilateralism

Strategic autonomy refers to a policy aimed at maintaining independence in key strategic areas, enabling a state to make its own decisions despite growing global interdependence. In International Relations scholarship, constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt has conceptualised autonomy as the capacity of a state-society complex to exercise control over the allocation of its resources and the direction of its political choices, not merely to ensure survival but also to preserve its liberty (Wendt, 1999). Within the Realist tradition, however, a conceptual distinction is drawn between autonomy and sovereignty. As David Held argues, sovereignty denotes the ultimate authority and power to make final decisions regarding a state's future, whereas autonomy refers more specifically to the capacity of nation-states to effectively implement goals and policies once they have been established (Sterling-Folker, 2002).

In the Indian context, however, the notion of strategic autonomy goes beyond this narrow distinction by combining both autonomy and sovereignty. It signifies not only independence in decision-making but also the ability to execute policies without external limitations (Krasner, 1999, p. 3). This broader understanding is crucial for analysing India's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. Strategic autonomy has evolved from the earlier doctrine of non-alignment. While non-alignment emerged during the cold war as a defensive strategy to avoid entanglement in bipolar rivalries, strategic autonomy is a proactive and pragmatic doctrine suited to a multipolar world order. It emphasises flexibility and the preservation of independent choice, allowing India to engage with multiple partners based on national interest rather than ideological commitments (Monsonis, 2010); Muraviev et al., 2022).

In practice, this concept is represented by multi-alignment, wherein India's partnership formation is not based on the criteria of formal alliances. This approach reflects a deep-seated concern about the risks of entrapment in rigid security arrangements, where a state's interests may become subordinate to those of a dominant partner. This means that India is not involved in treaty alliances and at the same time is strengthening ties in the field of defence, technology, maritime safety etc. Strategic autonomy is not isolation, it is the skillful handling of interdependence (Vu et al., 2024).

Minilateralism therefore becomes an important mechanism in the current context that strives to balance autonomy and cooperation. Minilateralism refers to small, issue-focused coalitions of like-minded states that prioritise flexible, selective coordination and faster problem solving over broad membership, legalisation, and heavy bureaucratic structures often associated with multilateral institutions (Thakur, 2024; Thakur, 2025). This is well captured in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which provides India with the opportunity to pursue security cooperation while preserving strategic autonomy. Minilateralism can enable a form of so-called flexible alignment in which India engages in a variety of overlapping partnerships while not being bound to any single bloc (Saha, 2025). This allows New Delhi to continue strengthening partnership with countries in the Indo-Pacific region such as the USA and Japan and continue its engagements with other platforms like BRICS and SCO. This way, rigid bloc politics is avoided and India's diplomatic manoeuvrability is bolstered. India's approach is a departure from the idea of autonomy as a lack of alignment to one of multiple alignments that need to be managed effectively. India is building a network of partnerships through minilateral frameworks to strengthen its agency and shape regional order instead of simply playing a passive role in it (Mishra, 2023).

India's Indo-Pacific vision

The idea of Indo-Pacific is portrayed as a new strategic construct but intellectual roots of Indian strategic thought go back to pre-Independence era. Indian leaders and thinkers were early to understand the geopolitical and maritime importance of the region. The change in the balance of power towards Asia was predicted by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* (1945) when he said that "the Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic... and India will inevitably exercise an important influence there" (Nehru, 2008). Likewise, K. M. Panikkar pointed out the importance of maritime power, stating that "it is the geographical position of India that makes the Indian Ocean the Indian Ocean" and that "in the future, a purely land policy of defence will be blind" (Panikkar, 1945). These preliminary insights reflect India's longstanding understanding of its presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This ideational interaction was also manifested in Nehru's attempts to build Afro-Asian solidarity through such events as the Asian Relations Conference (1947) and the Bandung Conference (1955) in which India was instrumental in forming a cooperative regional order. But in the cold war era, this pro-active outlook got restricted by security concerns with Pakistan and China and an inward-looking economic policy, which restricted India's quest for greater regional integration (Pandalai, 2022).

The conceptual evolution of Indo-Pacific in Indian policy thinking was slow and had to be accepted in the policy sphere as a whole after being introduced in the naval and strategic circles. The earliest mentions can be found in India's Naval Doctrine 2004, which acknowledged that the global maritime focus had shifted

to the Indian and Pacific Oceans and then further in the work of naval thinkers like Premvir Das and Gurpreet Khurana, who associated the idea with maritime cooperation and strategic competition (Das, 2006; Khurana, 2007). The concept became more prominent following Shinzo Abe's 2007 address, "Confluence of the Two Seas," which helped to shape the Indo-Pacific as a unified strategic region (Abe, 2007). The term had made its way into the official discourse after 2010 in India and was being emphasised by the policy makers in the context of India's economic development, regional security and relations with ASEAN. In 2015, India's Maritime Security Strategy recognised the Indo-Pacific as the key region of geopolitical and economic change and urged a shift in the strategic paradigm. The idea was further solidified under Narendra Modi with policies like the Act East Policy and the strengthening of the maritime engagement, recognizing the Indo Pacific as a key strategic and economic interest for India (Scott, 2012).

This evolution was not only a gradual expansion of terminology and policy, but also reflected deeper structural shifts in the regional and global order. The use of the Indo-Pacific concept in New Delhi's strategic vocabulary is a strategic maneuver that is a reflection of the changing dynamics of the international security landscape and the shortcomings of the post-cold war security order. India's shift from a predominantly continental to a more integrated maritime-continental strategy has been influenced by the rise and assertiveness of China and the question of America's future in the region. The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic theatre offered a platform to tackle these concerns, acknowledging that India's economic and security interests are increasingly intertwined with the stability of maritime routes from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific (Baruah, 2020).

This change can be best understood as the transition from 'Look East Policy' of the 1990s to the more strategic 'Act East Policy' and finally to a more comprehensive Indo-Pacific vision. The Look East Policy was more about economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries, whereas the Act East Policy was a shift towards more comprehensive strategic and security cooperation with the countries (Pandalai, 2022). India's modern Indo-Pacific strategy, however, is more expansive and ambitious, accompanied by not only participating in the region, but also influencing its dynamics. This change is not only an affirmation of continuity in India's policy of regional stability and multipolarity but also an acknowledgment that the goals of regional stability and multipolarity now demand that economic and security interests be brought closer together to address new challenges, such as China's growing maritime footprint (Gagan & Kumar, 2025).

India's articulation of its Indo-Pacific vision, particularly in the SAGAR and the 'Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative' (IPOI), offers a nuanced model for this new strategic posture. SAGAR, especially, acts as a doctrinal anchor which places

the maritime domain as a major pillar of national security. India's focus on inclusivity, a rules-based order and freedom of navigation make it a normative power, which differs from more exclusionary or hegemonic regional orders. Most importantly, the inclusivity that New Delhi has insisted upon is a linguistic and strategic protection, which enables India to deal with the West, while also making it clear that India's strategy is not to form a closed bloc of allies. This rhetorical balancing act is crucial for a state that wants to reap the rewards of security cooperation while avoiding the strategic price of formal alignment. It illustrates the manner in which India's policy processes help to reconcile the small with the big in the region (Luthra, 2024).

In 2025, this continued with the transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, which was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Mauritius. MAHASAGAR expands the geographical and policy horizon of SAGAR by introducing the concept of inter-connected oceanic regions, thereby highlighting the role of India in the Indian Ocean (Durai, 2025). It highlights security cooperation in addition to trade, capacity building, technology along with finance partnerships to promote sustainable growth. This expansion is a part of India's push to shift its focus from the Indian Ocean to the broader Indo-Pacific region and to incorporate security, connectivity and development diplomacy. The early efforts, like the deployment at sea and outreach to partners from Africa and island state of Indian Ocean region, indicate that MAHASAGAR is not just a vision but an operational plan as well (Vishwakarma, 2025; Pandey, 2025).

In reality, India's strategic actions in the Indo-Pacific region reflect a significant shift towards a 'maritime turn' and the development of an intricate network of overlapping partnerships. Instead of depending on single security provider, New Delhi has adopted a "strategic hedging" approach, which involves developing more advanced maritime domain awareness (MDA) projects, conducting joint naval exercises and logistics exchange agreements with multiple partners. This approach to collaboration demonstrates a desire to cooperate in a more functional, rather than systemic, manner, responding to specific problems like piracy, disaster relief and maritime security. India is not just diversifying its regional outreach to include middle powers such as Japan, Australia and France, but also making sure that they are not a secondary partner in a US-led coalition. This strategy would enable India to be a 'net security provider' in its neighbourhood and further expand its influence in the Western Pacific, thus keeping a balance between regional engagement and strategic independence (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024).

The Indo-Pacific pivot is not a radical shift from India's past but a sophisticated adaptation of its traditional strategic culture to the new systemic realities (Gagan & Kumar, 2025). The idea of strategic autonomy is still in place, but the way to get there has changed. In a more competitive setting, autonomy will no longer

be achieved by distance or by remaining neutral. Instead, it will be achieved by active involvement and by the capacity to build up several partnerships to avoid regional hegemony. New Delhi is not giving up its fundamental tenets, but simply adapting them to a world in which threats are more asymmetric and power more fluid. This adaptation serves India's interests in the face of China's rise to a systemic power and yet retains its sovereign decision-making capacity, which has always been a cornerstone of its grand strategy. This shift from a continental power to a maritime power will pave the way for India's greater engagement in minilateralism. As India looks to expand its strategic outlook and further strengthen its security cooperation, the question is how to balance the growing institutionalisation of such mechanisms as the Quad with the rigidities of a formal alliance?

From non-alignment to strategic minilateralism

India's foreign policy is about balancing its growing security architectures with its persistent refusal to enter a formal alliance system. India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific is not a timid move towards the West or a diluted version of non-alignment, but a nuanced and deliberate approach of 'selective alignment' that is part of a long-standing strategic autonomy (Hasan, 2026). In the post-cold war era of great power competition, New Delhi has realised that the old concept of autonomy or non-alignment and alignment is no longer a viable strategic tool to become an effective regional actor. Rather, India has implemented a hybrid approach that hinges on robust and meaningful security ties with its allies and like-minded counterparts such as the United States, Japan and Australia as the main platform for safeguarding its autonomy, which it is sometimes accused of abandoning. The use of minilateralism to fill the capability-threat gap results in India getting aligned like outcomes without the sovereignty and autonomy constraining costs of a formal treaty (Vishwanath, 2025; Lanka, 2025).

The rationale behind India's minilateral approach is pragmatic, aiming to ensure strategic agility and reduce institutional entrapment. In Realist theory, traditional alliances require a high level of policy convergence and may lead to the marginalization of a middle power's interests in favor of the hegemons. Such an arrangement is politically impossible in a post-colonial country such as India where the strategic culture is one of independent decision making. One alternative institutional structure is the minilateral, such as the Quad. These are clusters of issues, not treaty-based and are of a functional nature, enabling India to pool resources and intelligence in high-stakes areas such as maritime security without having to sign a 'collective defense' clause. The Quad is not an 'Asian NATO' but a flexible platform for 'strategic hedging' that enables New Delhi to demonstrate a collective will to Beijing, while maintaining 'exit options' for its own distinct interests in the global south and with other Eurasian powers (Mitra, 2023; Rajagopalan, 2021).

In the realm of Maritime security, this policy is reflected in a policy of deterrence by partnership instead of deterrence by alliance. Indian naval exercises have seen a significant increase in the number and complexity in the Indo Pacific, including Malabar and Milan naval exercises, and the formation of numerous logistics exchange agreements (Das, 2025). The clashes are effective strategic messages of India's commitment to a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). But a closer look at these partnerships shows that they are carefully orchestrated to prevent a formal military engagement. Instead of joining in a bloc-based naval exercise, India is focused on 'Maritime Domain Awareness' (MDA) and capacity building, which would further strengthen India's 'net security provider' role, through 'external balancing' against the asymmetric naval challenge from China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ((Mishra, 2024; Boquerat, 2018).

India's engagement is based on 'issue-based alignment' without an ideological or systemic commitment. Today, vulnerabilities in supply chains, critical technologies and environmental resilience are a key aspect of security in geopolitics. India's inclusion in the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) and the Quad's critical and emerging technology working groups reflects its efforts to harmonize its technical and economic requirements with the West to reduce reliance on China (Wadhwa, 2024). Same is the scenario in the recently fa Pax Silica in December 2025 to secure and diversify supply chain for semiconductor, artificial intelligence and critical minerals. It is not a move toward the West's economic bloc, but a strategic attempt to create domestic resilience and to cooperate effectively. India's linkage with specific sectors, including semiconductor security, 5G diversification, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), provides it with access to high-end Western technology and capital, which are vital to its own balancing act. This enables New Delhi to modernise its state capacity without losing its multi-aligned approach, which helps it maintain its diplomatic relations with non-Western groupings such as BRICS and the SCO (Amoss, 2025).

The balancing act of this strategic distance needs to be constantly adjusted and rebalanced (Kaura, 2018). While several scholars argued that India's increasing closeness to the United States will come at the cost of its strategic autonomy, which is not the case. Some analysts like S. Kalyanaraman have warned that greater interaction with Washington could lead to pressure on India on its core issues such as nuclear policy and Kashmir, while former National Security Advisor M. K. Narayanan (2018) has questioned institutional arrangements such as the 2+2 dialogue as a deviation from India's traditional strategic culture. India's defence cooperation with the United States undermines India's material independence by making it more dependent on the military and technological systems of the United States (Narayanan, 2018; Smith, 2020).

But such views are static and too limiting for what autonomy means. Today, however, Indian strategic thinking is more inclined to consider partnership with the United States as a force multiplier for autonomy rather than a limitation. India's relationship with Washington is functional and utilitarian, not in the traditional sense of a partnership, but rather to enhance its ability to function on its own in a more competitive regional environment. New Delhi is able to do this through sharing of technology, intelligence and maritime cooperation with the United States, which helps in balancing China's assertiveness without necessarily giving up on its strategic options (Devi & Singh, 2024).

This shift is rooted in broader structural changes. The steady deterioration of Sino-Indian relations marked by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash and ongoing border standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has significantly reduced the strategic space for equidistance. The growing cooperation between China and Pakistan, China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region and China's assertive territorial claims have deepened the perception in New Delhi that China is the biggest threat to India's sovereignty than Washington is. (Gokhale, 2021; Mardell, 2020). Hence, the tendency to align with the United States is viewed as a practical solution to the pressures of the system and not as a rejection of the non-alignment policy.

Meanwhile, India's policy is clearly non-alienated. It has continued to maintain 'special and privileged' partnership with Russia for its defence indigenisation requirements, this has been reflecting in India's membership in the groupings like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and has kept its independent stance on important global issues. This is in keeping with the broader policy of 'multi-alignment,' which involves India playing multiple power centres at the same time to not be dependent on any one partner. Cooperation with the United States is not a commitment, but one element of a diversified strategic portfolio (Mishra, 2023). India's changing stance is a basic re-thinking of the concept of strategic autonomy. In an age of growing great power competition, autonomy cannot be best maintained through isolation but by selective and strategic alliances that build a state's power to withstand coercion, as scholars such as Rajesh Rajagopalan (2017) have argued. In this regard, India's interaction with the U.S. is not about alignment but about creating a multipolar regional order where no single power, neither China nor the U.S., can dominate the strategic sphere in Asia (Rajagopalan, 2017).

India has pioneered a new approach in international relations by advancing a model of security integration that prioritises functional outcomes over institutional rigidity. Minilateralism is the key structural enabler of this hybridity, allowing India to 'align' its interests with the Quad partners without 'aligning' its destiny with them. It is a strategy that recognises that threats are too complex for any one state to deal with alone in the twenty first century, but the cost of traditional alliances too high for a state with India's history and

ambitions. India has developed a distinctive approach to 'flexible alignment' which involves strategic autonomy and high-end cooperation in a few areas, but not at the cost of compromising its sovereignty (Joseph, 2025, p. 313). This will have some deep implications for the future of the security architecture in the region. The question now is not whether India is aligning, but how India is redefining the nature of alignment itself. The future in the Indo-Pacific will not be a new cold war between two monolithic blocs: U.S. and China, but a complex mix of overlapping security clusters where middle powers such as India can make a difference in maintaining a precarious balance of power (Joseph, 2025).

Reconceptualizing alignment in the Indo-Pacific

India's strategic course in the Indo-Pacific is not a simple transition from the post-colonial policy of non-alignment to a formal western alliance system. Instead, India's changing posture is part of a larger strategic adaptation, in which the concept of strategic autonomy is being redefined to continue to be relevant in a more complex and multipolar international landscape. India's increased involvement in minilateral arrangements like the Quad is an example of selective or functional alignment that is operationally meaningful but institutionally flexible. India has tried to balance its material security needs, especially the threat from China's rise, with its tradition of independent decision making by separating security cooperation from the requirements of a formal alliance (Muraviev et al., 2022). Strategic autonomy has thus shifted from a policy of diplomatic isolation to the active and multi-faceted interaction with several partners, as a way to maintain national agency and avoid regional domination (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024).

States are generally believed to either maintain independence by staying far away or to forfeit autonomy for security assurances. But as the Indian case shows, the binary model is becoming an increasingly poor way of grasping the strategic actions of today's middle powers. States can pursue deep security cooperation, intelligence sharing and military interoperability without committing to the political limitations of a formal alliance arrangement. In this respect, alignment has become more and more issue-based, flexible, and modular, instead of fixed or ideological. Strategic autonomy is thus a more appropriate lens for understanding the actions of states that are also trying to maneuver in the face of growing great power competition, but do not necessarily want to join one bloc or the other, like Vietnam, Indonesia or France (Hoo & Teo, 2022).

The rise of minilateralism is a sign that regional stability might not rely on the same kind of blocs as during the cold war. Rather, the Indo-Pacific seems to be heading towards a more decentralised and networked order, with overlapping security partnerships and issue-specific coalitions. India's strategy is in line with this shift. Minilateral platforms offer states greater strategic flexibility and do

not suffer from the political rigidity of traditional alliances, through maritime security, supply chain resilience, critical technologies and humanitarian cooperation. In a world where a lot of regional actors consider the full containment of China to be economically impractical and politically undesirable, such arrangements are especially appealing. This means that India's approach helps to create a more resilient and flexible regional order that aims to balance without perpetuating the zero-sum bipolar confrontation (Rajagopalan, 2021).

The Indian experience is a part of the larger shift in middle-power strategy in the age of renewed great power rivalry. In a world of growing competition between the United States and China, middle powers are trying to steer clear of the strategic inflexibility of choosing between the two, while at the same time developing the partnerships they need to safeguard their security and economic interests (Zhiyenbayev, 2025). India's approach demonstrates that influence in a multipolar world does not require dependence on a single power. Instead, it depends on maintaining strategic relevance with multiple major powers. It is a step towards a more pragmatic and functional diplomacy, where alliances are built based on strategic needs, not ideology. The shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment thus marks not the loss of autonomy but its transformation in the face of a new international landscape (George, 2025).

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific strategy is in essence a unique blend of ideas and practices of modern statecraft in the context of a more competitive and interdependent international system. India has not given up its strategic autonomy, but has redefined it in a way that suits the requirements of the twenty first century geopolitics. New Delhi has tried to merge strategic advantages of alignment with political flexibility of autonomy through selective partnerships, minilateral engagement and issue-based cooperation. It is not a retreat from independent foreign policy, but a move to maintain national interest in a changing power dynamic, as we witness in the Quad. In the modern era, strategic autonomy is not just about political distance or non-engagement. Rather, autonomy is now more dependent on a state's capacity to involve several power centres without being structurally tied to any one of them. This is the rationale behind India's flexible alignment. India has been trying to diversify its relations with the West and at the same time maintain its ties with other countries like Russia and join institutions like BRICS and the SCO to maximise its strategic options in a multipolar world.

The Indian way of doing things is significant for the future of Indo-Pacific order. In an era of economic interdependence and increasing great power competition, flexible and issue-based partnerships could be the preferred method of regional security management. Middle powers will be far more important in determining this new order than what the alliance theory suggests regarding balance of power

and managing threats. The long-term effectiveness of India's hybrid approach will thus impact not just on India's own trajectory of becoming a leading power but also on the overall trajectory of regional stability and multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific.

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