

India's Strategic Autonomy in the Indo-Pacific: Navigating Great-Power Competition in a Changing Regional Order

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Abstract:

India's strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific has acquired increasing significance amid changes in the regional distribution of power and the intensification of great-power competition. The rise of China, the continuing strategic presence of the United States, and the emergence of flexible regional arrangements have created a complex environment in which India must pursue security and economic interests without becoming strategically dependent on any single major power. This paper examines how India seeks to preserve strategic autonomy while deepening strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. It asks whether India's growing engagement with the United States, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) represents a departure from strategic autonomy or a transformation of the way autonomy is practised. Drawing on qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, Indian foreign-policy documents, official statements, and policy material, the paper places India's contemporary strategy in dialogue with the concepts of hedging, balancing, multiple alignment, and minilateralism. It argues that these approaches capture important dimensions of Indian behaviour but do not, individually, explain the broader logic of India's foreign policy. The paper advances the argument that India's strategic autonomy is evolving from a principle of strategic distance into a practice of strategic capacity-building through diversified partnerships, selective.

Keywords: India, strategic autonomy, Indo-Pacific, great-power competition, China, United States, Quad, minilateralism

Introduction: India's Strategic Autonomy and the Emerging Indo-Pacific Order

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the most consequential geopolitical spaces in contemporary international politics. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic framework represents more than a geographical enlargement of the earlier Asia-Pacific conception. It reflects changing patterns of economic interdependence, maritime competition, military power, technological rivalry, and institutional politics across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. India occupies an important position within this transformation because its geography, economic interests, maritime concerns, and relations with both established and emerging powers place it directly within the regional strategic equation. The Indo-Pacific is therefore not simply an external framework

within which India operates; it has become an important arena in which India seeks to define and advance its own conception of regional order.

The significance of the Indo-Pacific for India has developed alongside a broader transformation in Indian foreign policy. The principle of strategic autonomy has long been associated with India's desire to preserve independent judgement in international affairs. During the Cold War, this principle was expressed institutionally through non-alignment. Yet non-alignment did not mean political isolation or the rejection of partnerships. It was an attempt to preserve freedom of action in an international system structured by bipolar rivalry. The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered that environment. American predominance, China's rapid economic and military rise, India's economic liberalisation, and the growing importance of Asian regional institutions required New Delhi to reconsider how autonomy could be maintained in a more interconnected international system.

The contemporary situation presents a distinctive strategic dilemma. India has moved considerably closer to the United States and other Indo-Pacific partners while continuing to emphasise strategic autonomy. Defence cooperation with Washington has expanded, the Quad has become an important platform for regional cooperation, and relations with Japan and Australia have acquired greater strategic depth. At the same time, India continues to maintain important ties with Russia and participates in institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. India has also repeatedly emphasised ASEAN centrality and an inclusive regional order. Its foreign policy therefore cannot be adequately captured through a simple opposition between alignment and non-alignment.

This tension has generated a growing scholarly debate. Monsonis (2010) showed that India's rapprochement with the United States could coexist with a continuing commitment to strategic autonomy. More recent scholarship has interpreted India's behaviour through several related concepts. Vinodan and Kurian (2024) understand India's approach primarily through strategic hedging, arguing that New Delhi seeks to deepen cooperation with the United States while retaining relationships with China and Russia and avoiding excessive dependence on any one power. Kara (2025) similarly argues that India employs hedging as a risk-management strategy in the context of US-China and US-Russia competition. Joseph (2025) shifts attention towards middle-power minilateralism, showing how smaller and flexible coalitions can help India pursue strategic interests while preserving autonomy. Schottli (2022) places India's contemporary strategy within a longer relationship between maritime geography, great-power politics, and the interaction of *realpolitik* and *moralpolitik*, while her more recent work argues that post-Galwan India has undertaken a form of limited hard balancing against China while continuing to pursue strategic autonomy.

These approaches illuminate important aspects of India's behaviour, but they also leave room for further conceptual clarification. Hedging explains India's effort to manage uncertainty and avoid excessive

dependence; balancing captures its response to China's growing power; and minilateralism explains the institutional form of several of its partnerships. Yet these practices are often treated as separate strategies rather than as interconnected instruments of a broader autonomy-seeking project. The present paper addresses this gap by asking: How does India seek to preserve strategic autonomy while simultaneously deepening strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific?

The paper advances the argument that India's strategic autonomy is evolving from a principle of strategic distance into a practice of strategic capacity-building through diversified partnerships, selective balancing, and flexible minilateral cooperation. In this formulation, hedging, balancing, and minilateralism are not alternatives to strategic autonomy; they are instruments through which autonomy is operationalised under conditions of interdependence and great-power competition. The paper therefore treats strategic autonomy as the organising principle and the other practices as mechanisms through which India seeks to preserve strategic choice.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach. It draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, books, Indian government documents, official statements, and policy material relating to India's foreign and security policy. The analysis focuses on the post-Cold War transformation of strategic autonomy, with particular attention to the post-2020 strategic environment. The purpose is not to measure India's foreign policy quantitatively but to interpret the strategic logic connecting its major partnerships, regional initiatives, and responses to changing power relations.

This study is significant because it brings together strands of scholarship that are often examined separately. Existing studies of Indian foreign policy have highlighted strategic autonomy, hedging, balancing, and minilateralism, but the relationship among these concepts requires further clarification. By treating strategic autonomy as the organising principle and hedging, selective balancing, multiple alignment, and minilateralism as mechanisms through which that autonomy is pursued, the paper offers an integrated interpretation of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. This perspective also shifts attention from the question of whether India is aligned with one power or another towards the more analytically useful question of how India seeks to preserve strategic choice under conditions of great-power competition.

The central analytical issue, therefore, is not whether India is moving closer to or farther away from particular major powers. Such a binary approach risks reducing a complex foreign-policy strategy to the language of alignment and non-alignment. A more useful question is how India manages the opportunities and constraints generated by multiple strategic relationships. The Indo-Pacific provides a particularly revealing context for examining this process because India must simultaneously respond to China's expanding power, benefit from cooperation with the United States and its partners, maintain relations with Russia, and preserve its

engagement with ASEAN and other regional institutions. Strategic autonomy in this context becomes a continuous process of managing competing pressures while attempting to maximise national strategic choice.

India's position is further complicated by the fact that the Indo-Pacific is not a single, unified strategic theatre. The security priorities of the Indian Ocean do not always correspond with those of the western Pacific, and India's immediate concerns differ in important respects from those of the United States, Japan, and Australia. India consequently seeks to shape the regional agenda rather than simply adopt the strategic priorities of other Indo-Pacific powers. Its emphasis on an inclusive and multipolar regional order, ASEAN centrality, maritime cooperation, and freedom of navigation reflects an effort to preserve an independent conception of regional security while simultaneously strengthening cooperation with like-minded states.

The contemporary relevance of strategic autonomy is also connected to the changing character of power itself. Whereas earlier conceptions of strategic autonomy were principally concerned with military blocs and political sovereignty, the present international environment is shaped by economic interdependence, technological competition, supply-chain vulnerabilities, maritime insecurity, and emerging forms of institutional competition. For India, autonomy therefore involves the ability to participate in these networks without allowing dependence to become a source of strategic vulnerability. This broader understanding is particularly significant in the Indo-Pacific, where economic and security interests are increasingly intertwined.

Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of India's Foreign Policy

Strategic autonomy has deep roots in India's postcolonial foreign-policy tradition. The experience of colonial rule contributed to an enduring concern with sovereignty, independent decision-making, and resistance to external domination. During the Cold War, non-alignment provided the principal institutional expression of this concern. India did not seek to remain detached from international politics; rather, it sought to avoid formal incorporation into competing blocs while retaining the freedom to determine its positions according to national interests.

The end of bipolarity transformed the conditions under which this policy operated. The disappearance of the Soviet Union removed an important element of India's earlier strategic environment, while the emergence of American unipolarity and China's rapid rise created new pressures. India's economic reforms simultaneously increased its dependence on and engagement with global markets. Under these circumstances, strategic autonomy could no longer plausibly mean maintaining distance from major powers. It increasingly came to mean maintaining freedom of action while engaging multiple centres of power.

Monsonis (2010) captures this transition through India's rapprochement with the United States. The expansion of India-US relations did not automatically eliminate strategic autonomy because New Delhi continued to resist formal alliance dependence. This distinction remains important. Partnership and autonomy are not

necessarily contradictory. A state may deepen cooperation with another power while retaining the ability to determine the scope and limits of that cooperation.

Jaishankar (2020) similarly presents contemporary Indian foreign policy as an effort to navigate uncertainty by expanding the range of strategic choices available to India. This approach is consistent with what is often described as multi-alignment. Unlike classical non-alignment, multi-alignment allows simultaneous engagement with several major powers and institutions. India can deepen defence cooperation with the United States while maintaining relations with Russia, cooperate with the Quad while supporting ASEAN-led institutions, and compete with China in selected areas while preserving diplomatic channels.

Strategic autonomy is therefore better understood as relational rather than absolute. It depends partly upon the availability of alternatives. Diversified economic relationships, technological partnerships, defence suppliers, diplomatic networks, and multilateral memberships can enlarge India's room for manoeuvre. Conversely, excessive dependence on a single external actor can narrow that room.

This interpretation also helps explain why strategic autonomy should not be equated with neutrality. India's participation in regional security arrangements demonstrates that it is willing to take positions and build capabilities when its interests require it. The question is not whether India participates in power politics, but whether it retains sufficient agency within those power relationships to make independent strategic choices.

The concept of strategic autonomy has consequently acquired a more practical and capability-oriented meaning. Diplomatic independence without economic and military capacity can remain largely rhetorical. India's pursuit of domestic defence production, technological capability, maritime power, and economic resilience is therefore relevant to the material foundations of autonomy. Strategic autonomy increasingly requires the capacity to resist coercion as well as the diplomatic freedom to choose among competing partners.

China and the Strategic Reorientation of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

China represents the most significant structural challenge to India's strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. The relationship combines economic interaction, diplomatic engagement, territorial disputes, military competition, and overlapping interests in the Indian Ocean. China's economic rise and military modernisation have altered the distribution of power in Asia, while its growing maritime presence has intensified Indian concerns about the security of the Indian Ocean and surrounding sea lanes.

The deterioration of India-China relations following the 2020 Galwan Valley confrontation represents an important turning point in India's strategic calculations. The crisis strengthened the perception that China's rise could directly constrain India's security and strategic choices. Schottli's recent analysis argues that post-Galwan India has sustained a form of limited hard balancing through investment in critical naval capabilities, deeper engagement with Quad partners, and stronger strategic partnerships across the Indo-Pacific.

Importantly, this balancing is interpreted as part of India's broader effort to strengthen strategic autonomy rather than as a straightforward move into an anti-China alliance (Schottli, 2026).

This development complicates an exclusively hedging interpretation of Indian foreign policy. Hedging remains visible in India's refusal to enter a formal alliance and its continued engagement with China and Russia. Yet the expansion of maritime cooperation, defence preparedness, and strategic partnerships indicates that India is also undertaking selective balancing. Kara (2025) similarly shows that India's contemporary strategy combines return-maximising and risk-contingency measures, allowing New Delhi to obtain benefits from competing powers while reducing the risks associated with dependence.

The distinction is analytically important. India's response to China is not simply about accumulating power against Beijing. It is about preventing China's growing capabilities from reducing India's strategic options. Balancing therefore becomes an instrument of autonomy. The strengthening of India's own capabilities and its partnerships with other powers can increase its ability to make independent decisions.

At the same time, India has avoided defining the Indo-Pacific exclusively as a theatre of China containment. This is evident in its continued emphasis on an inclusive regional order, ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation, sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes. India's official Indo-Pacific vision therefore combines security concerns with institutional and normative objectives.

The China factor nevertheless creates a persistent dilemma. Closer India-US cooperation is interpreted in Beijing as part of a broader balancing strategy, while India's own strategic community remains concerned about the possibility of excessive dependence on Washington. India's challenge is therefore to strengthen its position vis-à-vis China without allowing strategic competition to eliminate its freedom of action.

Strategic Partnerships, the Quad, and the Rise of Minilateralism

The India-US relationship illustrates most clearly the changing relationship between strategic partnership and autonomy. Cooperation has expanded across defence, intelligence, logistics, maritime security, space, critical and emerging technologies, and military exercises. The depth of this relationship would have been difficult to imagine during earlier periods of Indian foreign policy. Yet India has continued to resist the logic of a formal military alliance.

This distinction matters because strategic partnerships provide capabilities and opportunities without necessarily imposing the comprehensive obligations associated with alliances. India can cooperate with the United States in areas of convergence while retaining the ability to disagree when Indian interests diverge from American preferences. The relationship therefore demonstrates that autonomy can coexist with substantial strategic alignment on particular issues.

The Quad is a particularly important institutional expression of this approach. India, the United States, Japan, and Australia cooperate across maritime security, critical technologies, infrastructure, health, disaster relief, supply chains, and regional resilience. The Quad's official agenda is broader than military balancing, although the strategic context of China's rise remains an important background factor.

For India, the significance of the Quad lies partly in its flexibility. It does not require New Delhi to accept a formal alliance commitment or a rigid division of the Indo-Pacific into opposing blocs. Instead, it provides a platform through which India can strengthen maritime capabilities, deepen strategic partnerships, and contribute to regional public goods.

Joseph (2025) conceptualises this pattern as middle-power minilateralism. His argument is especially relevant because it treats India's participation in smaller coalitions as an instrument for preserving and enhancing strategic autonomy. The attraction of minilateralism lies in its combination of limited membership, focused cooperation, and institutional flexibility. It allows India to choose partners and issues according to particular strategic requirements rather than committing itself to a single comprehensive regional architecture.

The Quad therefore should not be interpreted simply as evidence that India has abandoned non-alignment. It is better understood as an example of how strategic autonomy has been reworked under contemporary conditions. India is willing to cooperate closely with major powers when such cooperation strengthens its strategic position, but it remains cautious about institutional commitments that could constrain future choices.

India's partnerships with Japan and Australia reinforce this pattern. Japan has become an important partner in infrastructure, connectivity, economic cooperation, and maritime security, while Australia has acquired greater significance through defence and maritime cooperation. These partnerships strengthen India's position without requiring it to subordinate its foreign policy to the priorities of any single power.

The broader implication is that India's strategic autonomy is increasingly produced through a network of relationships rather than through distance from international institutions. Strategic partnerships can enhance autonomy when they diversify India's capabilities and reduce dependence.

ASEAN Centrality and India's Vision of an Inclusive Indo-Pacific Regional Order

India's Indo-Pacific policy cannot be reduced to competition with China or alignment with the United States. ASEAN occupies an important position in India's regional vision because Southeast Asia connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific and provides a critical institutional centre for regional diplomacy.

India's Act East Policy has expanded political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries. India's support for ASEAN centrality is also significant because it reflects a preference for an inclusive regional architecture rather than a purely great-power-driven order. This position is consistent with

India's broader attempt to present the Indo-Pacific as a space of cooperation, connectivity, maritime security, and economic development.

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019, reinforces this approach. Its areas of cooperation include maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building, disaster-risk reduction, science and technology, and trade and connectivity. The breadth of the initiative demonstrates that India's conception of the Indo-Pacific includes developmental and institutional dimensions alongside traditional security concerns.

ASEAN centrality also serves an autonomy-related function. A regional order dominated exclusively by either the United States or China would narrow India's strategic choices. Engagement with ASEAN-led institutions provides India with an additional institutional pathway through which it can pursue regional interests. It also enables India to support a multipolar conception of regional order.

This broader vision is important in evaluating the China-balancing interpretation of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. China is undoubtedly a major factor in India's strategic calculations, but India also seeks to shape the regional order through principles of openness, inclusiveness, sovereignty, connectivity, and institutional pluralism. Scott (2012) noted that India's adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept was connected to both geopolitical and geo-economic interests and should not automatically be equated with an inherently China-centric balancing project.

Schottli (2022) similarly argues that India's great-power strategy reflects a combination of *realpolitik* and *moralpolitik* shaped by India's maritime geography and historical experience. This perspective helps explain why India's Indo-Pacific policy simultaneously contains security competition and normative claims concerning regional order.

India's regional vision therefore seeks to combine strategic competition with institutional engagement. ASEAN provides an important mechanism through which this balance can be maintained.

Strategic Capacity, Interdependence, and the Limits of Indian Strategic Autonomy

The most important analytical implication of India's evolving strategy is that strategic autonomy increasingly depends upon strategic capacity. Diplomatic flexibility is difficult to sustain when a state lacks the economic, technological, military, and institutional resources necessary to support independent choices.

This is particularly visible in the defence sector. India's historical dependence on external defence suppliers has created vulnerabilities even as its military capabilities have expanded. Diversification of defence procurement and efforts to strengthen domestic production are therefore directly relevant to autonomy. The

objective is not complete self-sufficiency, which is unrealistic in an interconnected global economy, but sufficient resilience to prevent external dependence from becoming strategic vulnerability.

Maritime capacity is equally important. India's geographical position gives it considerable potential influence in the Indian Ocean, but geography alone does not produce strategic power. Naval modernisation, maritime-domain awareness, logistics, infrastructure, and partnerships with Indian Ocean states are necessary to translate geography into sustained strategic influence. Brewster (2012) emphasises the importance of India's maritime and regional relationships in understanding its evolving role in the Asia-Pacific, while Schottli (2022) similarly links India's strategic behaviour to the maritime geography of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific.

Economic and technological capacity have become increasingly important components of strategic autonomy. Contemporary geopolitical competition extends beyond conventional military power into semiconductors, critical minerals, digital infrastructure, supply chains, energy security, and advanced technologies. India's strategic autonomy therefore depends on its ability to diversify economic dependencies and develop domestic technological capabilities.

This does not mean that India can or should pursue complete autonomy from the international economy. Such an objective would be both unrealistic and counterproductive. The more appropriate goal is strategic resilience: the ability to remain internationally connected while reducing vulnerabilities that could significantly constrain national decision-making.

Strategic autonomy must consequently be understood as a combination of internal capacity-building and external diversification. Domestic capabilities increase the ability to resist pressure, while diversified partnerships reduce dependence on any one external actor. The two dimensions reinforce each other.

This also clarifies why India's strategic partnerships should not automatically be treated as evidence of dependence. If cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, or other partners expands India's technological, maritime, or diplomatic options without eliminating its independent choices, such partnerships can contribute to autonomy. The key issue is therefore not the existence of dependence in an absolute sense but whether the relationship creates asymmetric constraints on India's strategic decision-making.

Theoretical Discussion: From Strategic Distance to Strategic Choice in Indian Foreign Policy

The existing literature provides several useful concepts for explaining India's Indo-Pacific strategy, but the present analysis suggests that they should be placed within a broader framework of strategic choice. Hedging, balancing, multi-alignment, and minilateralism describe different dimensions of Indian behaviour, but strategic autonomy provides the organising principle connecting them.

Hedging explains India's reluctance to choose decisively between competing powers and its effort to distribute risks and benefits across multiple relationships. Vinodan and Kurian (2024) and Kara (2025) demonstrate the importance of this logic in India's contemporary foreign policy. Balancing explains India's response to China's growing capabilities, particularly after the Galwan crisis, while Schottli (2026) demonstrates that India's limited hard balancing has become an important component of its post-Galwan strategy. Minilateralism explains the institutional form of several of India's partnerships, particularly the Quad, and Joseph (2025) demonstrates how such arrangements can enhance India's strategic position while preserving flexibility.

These approaches should not, however, be treated as competing explanations. They can be understood as instruments through which strategic autonomy is operationalised.

India hedges because it seeks to preserve strategic choice under uncertainty. It balances selectively because an excessive concentration of regional power in China's favour could reduce that choice. It participates in minilateral arrangements because such coalitions provide capabilities and influence without requiring comprehensive alliance commitments. It diversifies partnerships because dependence on a single power could constrain future decisions.

This interpretation also explains the apparent contradictions in Indian foreign policy. India can deepen cooperation with the United States while retaining relations with Russia; participate in the Quad while supporting ASEAN centrality; and compete with China while continuing to engage through multilateral institutions. These are not necessarily incoherent policies. They become intelligible when the preservation of strategic choice is treated as the underlying objective.

The argument also has a theoretical implication for the study of middle-power behaviour. Strategic autonomy is often treated as a normative doctrine inherited from non-alignment. The Indian case suggests that it can also be understood as a strategic practice shaped by changing distributions of power. Autonomy is not simply something a state possesses; it is something that must be continuously reproduced through capabilities, partnerships, institutions, and policy choices.

This perspective also provides a basis for distinguishing India's approach from formal alliance politics. Alliance systems seek security through institutionalised commitments, whereas India's strategy seeks security and influence while retaining room for adjustment. This does not mean that India rejects cooperation. Rather, it prefers forms of cooperation that maximise benefits while limiting irreversible strategic commitments.

Challenges and Future Trajectories of India's Strategic Autonomy in the Indo-Pacific

The sustainability of this strategy is nevertheless uncertain. The most significant challenge is the possibility of increasing polarisation between the United States and China. If the Indo-Pacific becomes divided into rigid

strategic blocs, India's ability to maintain relationships with competing powers may become progressively more difficult.

The China-Russia relationship adds another layer of complexity. Russia has historically been an important component of India's strategic autonomy, particularly in the defence sector. However, Moscow's increasingly close relationship with Beijing changes the strategic value and limitations of India's relationship with Russia. India therefore faces pressure to diversify defence and technology partnerships while avoiding a complete strategic rupture with Moscow.

The United States also creates a complex dilemma. Washington's growing interest in India as a major Indo-Pacific partner provides India with substantial strategic opportunities, but closer cooperation can also generate expectations of greater alignment. India's ability to resist such pressure while continuing to benefit from the relationship will be an important test of strategic autonomy.

China presents the opposite challenge. India cannot ignore Chinese power because of geographical proximity and overlapping maritime interests, yet an excessively confrontational policy could increase security and economic costs. India's ability to combine deterrence with diplomatic engagement will therefore remain important.

Domestic capacity represents another decisive variable. India's long-term autonomy will depend upon sustained economic growth, technological development, defence modernisation, maritime capabilities, and institutional capacity. External partnerships can supplement these capabilities, but they cannot substitute for them.

The future of strategic autonomy will therefore depend on whether India can maintain a sufficiently diversified portfolio of relationships while strengthening its own capabilities. The more capable and diversified India becomes, the greater its strategic freedom. Conversely, excessive dependence—whether on American technology, Russian defence supplies, Chinese economic inputs, or any other external source—could narrow that freedom.

The likely trajectory is therefore neither a return to classical non-alignment nor a transition to formal alliance politics. India's most plausible path is continued strategic pluralism: deeper partnerships with the United States and other Indo-Pacific powers, continued engagement with Russia and non-Western institutions, selective management of competition with China, and greater emphasis on domestic capacity.

Conclusion: Reconfiguring Strategic Autonomy in the Indo-Pacific

India's strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific represents an evolving practice of foreign policy rather than a fixed doctrine. Its intellectual roots lie in the postcolonial experience and the tradition of non-alignment, but

its contemporary expression has been shaped by the end of bipolarity, China's rise, American strategic engagement in Asia, India's economic transformation, and the emergence of a more interconnected regional order.

The central argument of this paper has been that India's strategic autonomy is moving from strategic distance to strategic choice. India no longer seeks to preserve autonomy primarily by remaining distant from major powers. Instead, it seeks to preserve autonomy by diversifying partnerships, selectively balancing against sources of strategic pressure, participating in flexible minilateral arrangements, and strengthening the domestic capabilities necessary to support independent decisions.

The concepts of hedging, balancing, multiple alignment, and minilateralism therefore capture different dimensions of India's behaviour, but they are best understood as instruments within a broader autonomy-seeking strategy. India's engagement with the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Quad does not automatically indicate the abandonment of strategic autonomy. Similarly, its continued relations with Russia and participation in institutions involving China do not necessarily indicate neutrality. Both sets of relationships can be understood as efforts to preserve strategic options.

China remains the principal structural challenge. The post-Galwan environment has encouraged India to strengthen maritime and defence capabilities and deepen strategic partnerships. Yet India continues to resist a rigid bloc-based conception of the Indo-Pacific and maintains its emphasis on ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, and a multipolar regional order.

The sustainability of this approach, however, depends upon material capacity. Strategic autonomy cannot be secured through diplomatic flexibility alone. Economic resilience, technological capability, defence modernisation, maritime power, and diversified supply chains increasingly constitute the material foundations of autonomous decision-making.

The paper therefore concludes that India's strategic autonomy remains both relevant and adaptable. Its contemporary significance lies not in India's ability to stand apart from great-power politics but in its capacity to engage great powers without becoming subordinate to any one of them. In this sense, India's Indo-Pacific strategy represents an attempt to transform strategic autonomy from a doctrine of distance into a practice of strategic capacity-building. Whether this strategy can remain sustainable as US-China competition intensifies will depend on India's ability to preserve diversified partnerships, strengthen domestic capabilities, and retain sufficient room for independent strategic choice.

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