

India's geopolitical transformation

From third-world leadership to emerging power



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OPINION

The history of international relations has witnessed the rise of actors who, by making smart use of their geography and political capital, have managed to carve out an independent role on the world stage. During the Cold War, the Republic of India stood as a textbook case of such a player — one that cemented its place as an autonomous geopolitical pole by setting forth an alternative paradigm.

However, the collapse of the bipolar order and the emergence of new global realities have brought to the surface a fundamental question: Is India still the autonomous player it once was, or has it fallen into new patterns of dependency? Unraveling this transformation calls for a deeper look into the roots of the Non-Aligned strategy in the context of the Cold War and an analysis of how it plays out in today's complex international system. This piece argues that India has not entirely let go of its autonomy, but rather, in a pragmatic response to its shifting strategic environment, has shifted gears from idealistic non-alignment to multilateral pragmatism.

India during Cold War

When the world was split down the middle between two rival blocs, India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, took up a bold and innovative position, establishing itself as the symbol of autonomy and leadership of the Third World. The political philosophy of non-alignment, the cornerstone of India's foreign policy at the time, was not passive neutrality but an active strategy to keep its freedom to the fullest and steer clear of the power politics of the superpowers. This approach allowed India to draw in dozens of newly independent nations that wanted to



The illustration shows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi between geographical representations of the United States and China.

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stay out of the ideological tug-of-war between Washington and Moscow. Through leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, India effectively built up a third geopolitical bloc grounded in principles such as respect for national sovereignty and peaceful dispute resolution. In practice, this translated into keeping an even keel in relations with both camps. Although New Delhi's ties with Moscow ran deeper — historically, economically, and especially militarily (particularly after their 1971 treaty) — India never signed up as a full ally of the Eastern bloc. At the same time, it kept open its channels of communication and access to development aid from Europe

and the United States. This knack for playing both sides deftly and extracting concessions from each, without bowing to either, showcased India's distinctive autonomy and unique position. Tensions with Pakistan were, for the most part, confined to a bilateral, regional rivalry over Kashmir, and India largely kept that quarrel from spilling into the broader Cold War narrative. All told, India, during this period, stood out as a self-reliant geopolitical actor, operating based on national calculations and an alternative ideological vision.

India after Cold War

The collapse of the Soviet Union

and the end of the bipolar system forced India to rethink its place in the international order from the ground up. Two major developments shaped this transition most: the rise of the People's Republic of China as a dominant economic and military rival along India's borders, and the broader spread of global multipolarity. In response, the old doctrine of non-alignment, once meaningful in a bipolar world, gave way to a more flexible, adaptive strategy known as "multilateral pragmatism".

In this new paradigm, autonomy is no longer about isolation but about the ability to work with all centers of power simultaneously and strike a bal-



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ance that serves one's interests. The main catalyst behind this change in India was the growing Chinese threat. Unresolved land disputes, recurring border clashes, and Beijing's expanding strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean — through its sweeping Belt and Road Initiative — pushed New Delhi to forge deeper strategic partnerships with the United States and its allies. The formation and institutionalization of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) among the US, Japan, Australia, and India stands out as a prime example of this strategic pivot. The group has set up a solid framework for maritime security cooperation and countering Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific.

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On the bilateral front, India's ties with Washington have been upgraded to a "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership". Yet, despite tensions with China, economic interdependence and ongoing border diplomacy continue. Even amid the Ukraine war, India, despite mounting Western pressure, has refrained from condemning Russia and kept up oil imports and military cooperation with Moscow — autonomous decisions grounded in its own national calculus.



Then-Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (R), Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (L), and Yugoslavian president Josip Broz Tito sign documents at the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961.

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