

Prospects For Changes in India's Foreign Policy Strategy in New Geopolitical Realities: Significance for Ukraine

Olha Vorozhbyt



Publisher

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv)

Author

Olha Vorozhbyt, Affiliated Expert of the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

Disclaimer

All rights reserved. Requests for review copies and other enquiries concerning this publication are to be sent to the publisher. The responsibility for views, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this publication rests exclusively with the author(s) and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

The publication is prepared under the project "Strengthening the Analytical Capabilities of the Foreign Policy Decision-Making with the Civil Society" of the Centre for International Security with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv).



© 2025 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv)
wul. Akademika Bohomoltsia 5, Office 1, 01024 Kyiv, Ukraine
Telephone: +380444927443
<https://www.kas.de/en/web/ukraine>



© 2025 Centre for International Security
Borodina Inzhenera Street, 5-A, 02092 Kyiv, Ukraine
Telephone: +380999833140
<https://intsecurity.org/>



© 2025 Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"
Telephone: +380935788405
<http://prismua.org/>

Table of contents

Summary	4
----------------	----------

Problem Analysis	5
-------------------------	----------

"Multipolarity" as a Defining Factor of Foreign Policy and China's Role	6
---	---

Rapprochement with Europe	7
---------------------------	---

India-Russia: How Strong is Friendship?	8
---	---

The United States	10
-------------------	----

Regional Alliances and Cooperation	10
------------------------------------	----

Conclusions	12
--------------------	-----------

Summary

Over the past decade, India's foreign policy has undergone significant changes. Economic progress and skillful political positioning have transformed India into one of the leading countries of the Global South. At the same time, this is not enough to provide New Delhi with military and economic advantage in case of simultaneous threats from its two main adversaries – China and Pakistan – even while maintaining current economic growth rates.

Since the Cold War, India has insisted on "strategic autonomy" as a key feature of its foreign policy. India's first Prime Minister J. Nehru emphasized that India would not be a "follower of any camp" (USSR or USA). Contemporary Indian leaders insist that such a position is extremely important for balancing the country in a hostile environment. Moreover, for India today, multipolarity is the key to its own success, where it sees itself as one of the poles in the future. Therefore, although New Delhi has significantly strengthened relations with the United States and European Union (EU) over the past ten years, it does not reject, and in some cases reinforces, relations with the West's adversaries, particularly Russia and Iran.

Previous US administrations were more accommodating toward India's desire to balance between different alliances. However, the current administration of President D. Trump, with its transactional approach to relations, may be harsher toward such an approach. The latest escalation has been caused by the continuation of Russian-Indian oil trade.

At the same time, the volatility of decisions by the current American administration may strengthen India's fears about US unreliability. Therefore, New Delhi may try to seek ways to further appease China and continue balancing in its vision of a multipolar world. Additionally, India is strengthening economic and military-technical dialogue with the United Kingdom, EU, and Japan. Under these conditions, the optimal solution for Ukraine is to develop both its own track in relations with India and cooperation with European partners in the West: the United Kingdom and EU.

Problem Analysis

India is often perceived as a country where spirituality prevails over rationality, but the country's foreign policy perhaps best demonstrates how mistaken this assumption is.

"Of the two (forms of policy), double policy and alliance, double policy (i.e., making peace with one and waging war with another) is preferable; for whoever adopts the double policy enriches himself" – so teaches the ancient Indian [treatise](#) on politics, economics, and statecraft "Arthashastra", written in the 4th century BCE. Among other things, it outlines the mandala (circle) theory of foreign policy with circles of friends and enemies, where "your neighbor is your natural enemy, and your neighbor's neighbor is your friend". The state's foreign policy in the treatise is viewed through the lens of the concept of *vijigishu* – the desire to conquer. Max Weber, comparing in his famous lecture "Politics as a Profession" the "Arthashastra" and Machiavelli's "The Prince", calls the latter "innocent" compared to the Indian treatise, while Henry Kissinger notes that this work contained the foundations of realistic political vision long before "The Prince" and is "a combination of Machiavelli and Clausewitz".

The advice of Kautilya, the probable author (or one of the authors) and compiler of the treatise, should not be taken as something that can be directly applied to Indian foreign policy today, but, as noted in his book "How India Sees the World" by contemporary Indian diplomat Shyam Saran, this is what shaped its foundations. Therefore, Kautilya's name and quotes from "Arthashastra" are present in contemporary Indian political discourse, and representatives of the current government use them to argue certain political steps. For example, one of Prime Minister Modi's closest [associates](#) – Amit Shah.

At the same time, there are many contemporary "visionary books" that outline more clearly how modern Indian foreign policy is formed, as it has undergone significant transformations in the past ten years. One of these is ["The India Way"](#) by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, where he calls for political realism and rejection of old political romanticism. The politician outlines India's multilateral approach to its foreign policy, which is perhaps most eloquently reflected in a quote from the book that reads: *"This is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support"* [Jaishankar S. The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World]. Despite the fact that five years have passed since the book's publication, bringing certain changes to India's position, New Delhi has not abandoned the outlined approach.

Over the past decade, India's foreign policy has undergone significant changes. Economic progress, particularly rapid GDP growth (according to some forecasts, India will enter the top three largest economies in the world by 2030), and skillful political positioning have transformed India into one of the leading countries of the Global South.

"Multipolarity" as a Defining Factor of Foreign Policy and China's Role

Одна One of the key foundations of Indian foreign policy is the pursuit of autonomy in decision-making. Such autonomy is important for every country, while New Delhi particularly emphasizes this due to its colonial experience. As researcher Aparna Pande notes, India does not see itself as a formal ally of major world powers. During the Cold War, the manifestation of this approach was the Non-Aligned Movement, where India was a key actor. Today, this somewhat influences India's emphasis on "multipolarity" of the world order, where it, as the world's fastest-growing major economy, sees itself as one of the poles.

Thus, India remains active both in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where China is the de facto leader, as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), where the United States leads. At the same time, China's increasing aggressiveness and the confrontation between Beijing and Washington make such geopolitical pirouettes increasingly difficult for New Delhi. If balancing between two poles during the Cold War brought India strategic dividends, current balancing carries many risks.

On one hand, despite prolonged confrontation, including territorial claims that periodically turn into border skirmishes (the last significant incident occurred in 2020 in the Aksai Chin region), China remains India's largest trading partner. Moreover, despite warnings and the policy of *atmanirbhar bharat (self-reliant India)* proclaimed in 2017, the country remains critically dependent on China for electronics supplies: Beijing's share in Indian imports of this product as of 2022 was 43.9%; technical equipment (39.7%); and components for chemical and pharmaceutical industries – 26.6%, despite India being one of the world leaders in pharmaceutical manufacturing. Despite India's economic growth, the gap between its and China's economies is widening. If in 1989 the difference between China's and India's GDP was \$50 million, by 2012 this gap was six times higher. According to various projections, India will not be able to catch up with China in the coming decades. And in case of military confrontation, it cannot stand against Beijing without allies' support.

On the other hand, China is becoming an increasingly greater challenge to India's regional dominance. India, as the largest country in South Asia, views its neighbors within the framework of a "civilizational sphere of influence", as it sees itself through the lens of millennia of history. China's attempts to interfere in this sphere of influence, particularly through strengthening cooperation with India's neighbors, is perceived as a security threat.

This is one of the reasons why immediate neighboring countries are one of India's foreign policy priorities. Prime Minister N. Modi mentioned this during his inaugural speech as Prime Minister in June 2024. At the same time, China increasingly poses challenges. Thus, Beijing is now the main trading partner for Bangladesh, as well as a significant trading partner for other neighboring countries of India. China actively uses economic levers of influence, particularly by investing in ports and other infrastructure in South Asia (the largest projects being Hambantota port and Colombo port in Sri

Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan, the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge in the Maldives, railway connection on the Padma Bridge in Bangladesh, etc.). Virtually all South Asian countries, except India and Bhutan, are active recipients of Chinese-funded projects.

Cooperation between China and Pakistan has always been quite strong given their common desire to oppose India. Now Pakistan is an important element of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the latest [escalation](#) of the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025 also highlighted the importance Beijing plays as a partner in weapons and defense supplies for Islamabad. In addition to the spring escalation of the conflict becoming a "testing ground" for Chinese weapons and equipment, Beijing shared intelligence with Islamabad directly during the clashes.

Rapprochement with Europe

One of the characteristic features of India's foreign policy over the past ten years has been the strengthening of India-EU cooperation and generally the European track in Indian foreign policy. Given that Ukraine officially opened negotiations for EU membership last year, the rapprochement between India and the EU may mean new opportunities for Ukraine.

India and the EU have been strategic partners since 2004, but for a long time this cooperation was maintained at the level of several capitals – London, Paris, and Berlin – rather than the collective union. Now both partners see the need to strengthen cooperation. One of the reasons for the rapprochement between New Delhi and Brussels, particularly over the past year, is China's increasing aggressiveness and the volatility and instability of US foreign policy. The threat of additional tariffs from the United States also contributes to more active cooperation between Brussels and New Delhi.

One manifestation of such activation between the two partners was the [visit](#) to New Delhi by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen together with more than 20 European Commissioners on February 27-28, 2025. This was the first visit of such format by Brussels representatives to New Delhi. Currently, the EU is India's second-largest trading [partner](#) (considering trade in goods (in 2024 this constituted 11.5% of India's total goods trade)). New Delhi, in turn, is expanding the geography of cooperation with European countries. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has visited many countries where none of his predecessors had set foot. Particularly, besides Ukraine, he visited Poland, Austria, and Croatia for the first time.

Additionally, during his premiership, relations with Poland and the Czech Republic have been elevated to the level of strategic partnership, new embassies have been opened in the Baltic states. India has also strengthened cooperation with Scandinavian countries. Thus, the third India-Scandinavian [summit](#) in Norway was planned for mid-May 2025, which had to be postponed due to a terrorist attack near the village of Pahalgam in Kashmir and the escalation of the India-Pakistan conflict. This was to be the second such summit (the first was held in May 2022).

Cooperation between New Delhi and Brussels has long been most actively formed along economic tracks, but now has many dimensions, some of which are institutionalized. Thus, one such form is the EU-India Connectivity Partnership, another is the EU-India Trade and Technology Council. One of the biggest achievements of the historic visit by the European Commission to India was the promise to finalize by the end of 2025 an ambitious free trade agreement between the EU and India, negotiations for which began in 2007. The agreement, if finalized, will create the world's largest free trade area, as it will be an agreement between the world's second-largest and fifth-largest economies. Since the signing of the agreement has been delayed for so long, and previously announced deadlines have been violated, there is also a risk of repeating this scenario in this case. At the same time, new geopolitical challenges, particularly US tariff policy, may conversely influence the agreement to finally be signed.

Importantly, in July 2025, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade [Agreement](#) (CETA) between India and the United Kingdom was signed, according to which 99% of Indian exports to the United Kingdom are [exempted](#) from tariffs. Similarly, the United Kingdom will be able to export over 90% of goods to India without tariffs. Besides economic weight, this document has important geopolitical significance. It testifies to the rapprochement of the two countries as equal partners, rather than through post-colonial ties (diaspora or legal system). Despite the fact that India's trade volumes with the United States and China are not comparable to trade volumes with the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom remains an important export market. At the same time, India's "strategic autonomy", within which New Delhi does not intend to abandon cooperation with Russia and China, will likely affect possibilities for technology transfer or other sensitive aspects.

In June 2025, India and the EU also discussed establishing bilateral cooperation in security and defense. Thus, the joint [communiqué](#) on the new India-EU Strategic Agenda states that "leaders also committed to explore the possibility of establishing a security and defense partnership, similar to those the EU already has with Japan and South Korea". In the process of diversifying sources of arms purchases, India has been increasing arms purchases from EU countries in recent years. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) [data](#), France became India's second-largest arms supplier (33% of all imports) for the period 2020-2024; Germany is in fifth place.

India-Russia: How Strong is Friendship?

On one hand, India is concerned about the rapprochement between Russia and China, on the other hand, it does not cease, and in the energy sector has even increased cooperation with Moscow during the full-scale invasion. At the same time, when it comes to arms purchases, India has been reducing its dependence on Russian weapons since 2014, which was one of the key elements of cooperation earlier. Thus, if the share of Russian arms exports to India in 2010-2014 was 70%, in 2024-25 it was 36%.

At the same time, overall trade turnover between the countries has grown to a record level (\$68.7 billion in 2024-25, which is 5.8 times higher than the pre-pandemic [level](#) of

\$10.1 billion), as India actively buys Russian oil (before the full-scale invasion only about 1% of oil was of Russian origin, now almost 40%), which it then supplies as refined products, including to European countries. Brussels and other Western capitals [criticize](#) India for buying Russian oil, and one of India's oil refining plants, Nayara Gujarat (49.1% of Nayara Gujarat shares belong to Russian company Rosneft), was sanctioned by the EU as part of the 18th package (July 2025). After this, [information](#) appeared that some Indian companies refuse to work with Nayara Gujarat.

The White House, after implementing 25% tariffs on India, also [criticized](#) large volumes of Russian oil purchases by New Delhi and promised additional penalties, as this finances the Russian war machine. India, in turn, notes that for it as a developing country, the ability to pay less for energy means greater opportunities for the poor population. However, as energy [experts note](#), Indians do not directly benefit from cheaper Russian energy. Instead, this develops the oil refining industry, exports of which constitute one-fifth of Indian exports. Most Indian oil refineries are state-owned, but four are privately owned. Two of them belong to the Indian energy conglomerate Reliance Industries (owned by billionaire Mukesh Ambani) and together constitute the world's largest oil refining complex. In December last year, [reports](#) appeared about a ten-year agreement between Rosneft and Reliance Industries for oil supplies worth over \$13 billion.

After last year's visit to Moscow by N. Modi, [speculations](#) remain about a probable visit by V. Putin to New Delhi at the end of 2025. Although Delhi is, on one hand, much more restrained in relations with Moscow than before the full-scale war, when Modi-Putin summits occurred annually, it continues to conclude agreements with Moscow, especially when it comes to certain types of weapons.

In July 2024, on the eve of N. Modi's visit to Moscow, Russian state corporation Rostec [announced](#) the start of production in India of armor-piercing shells for Russian battle tanks (production takes place within the "Make in India" program and thus not only shells but also ballistic missiles are produced in India). After the visit to Russia in December 2024 by Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, negotiations continue between India and Russia regarding a [contract](#) worth \$4 billion, for which New Delhi plans to buy the "Voronezh" radar station. All this testifies that India does not completely reject Russia as a source of arms purchases, particularly when it comes to certain types. Thus, the contract signed in 2018 for the supply of five S-400 systems threatened India with US sanctions but did not stop the country from concluding it. However, this very contract is evidence of the Kremlin's unreliability as a partner for New Delhi. All systems were supposed to be delivered to India by the end of 2023, but now Moscow promises to do this by the end of 2026.

Despite these agreements, India will likely continue to diversify sources of arms purchases. However, when it cannot buy weapons in the West, it will continue to consider Russia as a necessary partner, even despite unreliability.

The United States

Over the past ten years, relations with the United States have experienced a stage of real transformation, particularly through the strengthening of security and defense cooperation. Thus, in 2016, the United States recognized India as a Major Defense Partner, and according to this status, India has received license-free access to a wide range of military technologies and dual-use technologies since 2018. At the same time, tariff pressure from Donald Trump, who imposed tariffs of over 50% on India by decree on July 7, may roll back the progress of recent years. Also, the unity of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is now in question.

During President J. Biden's term, N. Modi visited the United States with a multi-day state [visit](#) in June 2023, during which a number of agreements were signed in defense and security sectors. The United States agreed to provide India with a license to produce GE F414 engines used in military aircraft, and also agreed to promote startup development in the defense industry. Narendra Modi in February 2025 was one of the first world leaders to [visit](#) the United States after D. Trump's second victory, and Delhi placed many hopes on his presidency. Particularly, Indians were close to Trump's initial rhetoric regarding Russia, and they also hoped that the new administration would help keep oil prices low, which is beneficial for Delhi.

However, first American rhetoric during the escalation of the India-Pakistan conflict, when Donald Trump claimed that stopping military actions was achieved through threats of economic sanctions against both countries (this was repeatedly rejected by both Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and Prime Minister N. Modi), and then the high-level reception in Washington of Pakistani Commander-in-Chief General Asim Munir (in Pakistan, actual power remains in the hands of military command), flirtation with Pakistan and probable agreements between Washington and Beijing, return New Delhi to past fears when Washington chose Islamabad instead of New Delhi. Thus, in India's eyes, all this further justifies multilateralism in external relations, as, according to Indian politicians, this is precisely the approach that allows the country to achieve set goals under threats from neighbors.

Regional Alliances and Cooperation

Given this, India is increasing cooperation with important regional actors. Thus, over the past ten years, [cooperation](#) with Japan has significantly strengthened, especially in the field of maritime security. For both countries, freedom and openness of the Indo-Pacific region is of great importance. Particularly, cooperation between the Indian Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) in various spheres in the Indo-Pacific region is well-established. Economic cooperation between the two countries has also been on the rise over the past ten years.

Cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also strengthened. This [cooperation](#) is one of the pillars of the so-called Act East policy of the Indian government, within which New Delhi establishes relations with Southeast Asian countries. Between India and member countries of the organization, there is a free trade

area for goods and services. India also strengthens the bilateral track in cooperation with member countries of the organization. Thus, at the beginning of August, relations between India and the Philippines were elevated to the level of strategic relations. At the same time, in interaction with the Indo-Pacific region, India also adheres to its "strategic autonomy", therefore it does not acquire full membership in regional alliances.

Conclusions

According to many forecasts, India will likely enter the top three largest economies in the world by 2030, although it will significantly lag behind the first two – the United States and China. At the same time, the turbulence of American foreign policy will likely push the country even more toward "not choosing sides" and not joining any "camps", thus continuing to protect its "strategic autonomy".

Although this does not refute the fact that New Delhi will try to preserve relations with Washington, even to the point of abandoning Russian oil, which has now become the main "bone of contention". So far, in official [statements](#), Indian representatives have tried to defend their energy cooperation with the Kremlin, but [information](#) is already appearing that state-owned Indian oil refineries will purchase oil from October 2025 not from Russia, but from other sources. US tariffs make purchasing from Russia unprofitable for India.

At the same time, growing aggressiveness from China in the region and strengthening cooperation between Russia and China will encourage India to strengthen cooperation with democratic countries in the region (for example, Japan) and the West (United Kingdom and France), as well as the EU. An important element for strengthening India as a counterweight to China is economic growth, and this is what India is currently actively trying to establish.

Given this, Ukraine should continue to work on strengthening bilateral relations with India on mutually beneficial terms, particularly on implementing those tasks that were defined in the joint [statement](#) of Ukraine and India following the results of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kyiv. It is also important to maintain political [cooperation](#) at the highest level – visits and meetings of leaders of both countries. For both India and Ukraine, strengthening economic cooperation can bring benefits and fit into the general context of India's policy priorities. Considering the Indo-Pakistani conflict and complex relations with China, India has vast experience in maintaining security of civilian nuclear infrastructure. After Russia's full-scale invasion, the security of civilian nuclear infrastructure in Ukraine is also an urgent issue. Working on the challenges that Ukraine currently faces in this direction, both countries can propose the necessary, updated solution that can later serve global benefit. The same applies to the possibility of military-technical cooperation, considering India's search for new partners and suppliers.

Despite its unwillingness to join any "camps", India remains an important democratic partner for the West in South Asia, one of the keys to cooperation with Global South countries.