



From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: India's Strategic Shifts in Foreign Policy Under Narendra Modi

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:	May	21, 2024
Revised:	Jul	12, 2024
Accepted:	Aug	29, 2024
Available Online:	Dec	30, 2024

Keywords: Non-Alignment, Multilateral, Strategic Shifts

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

This study critically examines the transformation of India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, focusing on its shift from a traditional non-aligned stance to a pragmatic multi-alignment strategy. While India has historically projected a neutral and balanced foreign policy, its increasing strategic engagements—particularly in defense, economic partnerships, and multilateral agreements—suggest a recalibrated diplomatic approach. The study explores India's evolving relations with major global powers, notably the United States, Russia, and China, alongside its participation in security frameworks such as QUAD, BECA, COMCASA, and LEMOA. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Complex Interdependence Theory and Social Constructivism, this research argues that India's foreign policy under Modi reflects a strategic realignment rather than adherence to neutrality. Through qualitative case study analysis and textual evaluation, the study argues that India's proclaimed neutrality is increasingly a diplomatic construct, with its policies reflecting selective alignments rather than balanced neutrality. Ultimately, the research concludes that while India continues to emphasize its strategic autonomy, its foreign policy is now shaped by realpolitik and power-driven alignments rather than the principles of traditional non-alignment.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61503/ciissmp.v3i3.262>

Citation: Rahim, A., Abbas, M., & Wahyudi, A. (2024). From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: India's Strategic Shifts in Foreign Policy Under Narendra Modi. *Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices*, 3(4), 247-267.

1.0 Introduction

Foreign policy plays an important role in shaping a state's actions in the international arena. A neutral and balanced foreign policy allows a state to maintain stable and sovereign relations with other states (Bose, 2019). In the era of shifting global dynamics, the pursuit of a strictly neutral foreign policy poses significant challenges for many states. Still, India consistently presents itself to the world as a neutral actor on the international stage. India's neutral posture has been a defining feature of its foreign policy. From the early years of its independence, India has adopted a non-aligned and balanced approach in world politics. The Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) allowed India to successfully navigate a middle path between the two superpower blocs, the USA and the USSR (Sharma & Gupta, 2018). With the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the geopolitical dynamics have shifted. With a unipolar world under U.S. hegemony and the rise of multiple actors, India has had to recalibrate its foreign policy to balance strategic autonomy with new geopolitical realities (Mehta, 2020). India, under Modi's administration, continues to assert its commitment to neutrality and balanced relations with major powers. The research will explore India's enhanced relationships under Modi's administration—with key global actors like the USA, Russia, and China; its active involvement in multilateral forums; strategic partnerships; and defense agreements. These factors raise the question of whether India can genuinely maintain its traditional non-aligned stance and whether its historical legacy of non-alignment remains a practical reality or has become merely a diplomatic construct.

The policy of non-alignment was institutionalized by the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. He played an important role in shaping India's foreign policy during the Cold War (1945-1989). Nehru was inspired by the ideals of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence. He believed that the non-alignment approach best served India's national interest. As highlighted in Ganguly's book *Indian Foreign Policy: Prospects and Retrospects*, India sought a sovereign and independent foreign policy that emphasized strategic autonomy. Nehru's vision of neutrality was aimed at positioning India as a leader of the non-alignment movement (Ganguly, 2010). However, even the father of the non-alignment movement had faced difficulty in implementing the policy in its pure form. In the report *Farewell Non-Alignment* by Carsten Rauch, the author argues that the non-alignment policy was intended to enable India to maintain good relations with both superpower blocs. But Nehru found it challenging, and when necessary, the state leaned towards the Soviet Union (Rauch, 2008).

Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who assumed the office of the Prime Minister in 2014, the Indian foreign policy has undergone significant evolution. Unlike previous Prime Ministers—whose visions were limited and regionally focused—Modi has embraced an assertive and pragmatic strategy to elevate India's position on the global stage (Tomar & Shukla, 2024). Tomar and Shukla argue that Modi's administration has shifted away from the traditional non-alignment policy towards more open, robust and transparent relations with emerging and major powers. Through this strategy, Modi not only strengthened India's foreign policy but also elevated India to the position of an important actor in international relations (Tomar & Shukla, 2024). Under Modi's leadership, India has formed strong economic ties with numerous nations. India's active

participation in the I2U2 initiative, involving India, Israel, the UAE and the US, focuses on joint investment in infrastructure, energy and the technology sector. India has also played an important role in the Middle East Economic Corridor, aimed at improving connectivity and trade between South Asia and the Middle East. This corridor further solidifies India's position on the economic landscape (Chaudhary, 2023).

One of the critical dimensions of Modi's foreign policy has been the state's increased involvement in security agreements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—a strategic alliance with the United States, Japan, and Australia aimed at counterbalancing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific (Pant & Joshi, 2020). India has also signed a number of significant military agreements to increase the US-India strategic partnership, such as BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), GSOM (General Security of Military Information Agreement), and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). India also maintained strategic engagements in military, trade, energy, and nuclear cooperation with Russia, while fostering key defense, energy, and technology partnerships with states such as Israel, Japan, France, and the UAE (Mohan, 2015). India has historically positioned itself as a non-aligned actor on world politics, pursuing a policy of balanced diplomacy. However, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, Indian foreign policy has evolved, raising questions about the state's commitment to neutrality. Modi's tenure is characterized by stronger alliances with major powers and a notable tilt towards a pro-Western ideology. This research aims to examine whether Modi's approach in international relations truly reflects balanced neutrality or signals a deliberate strategic alignment.

1.1 Hypothesis

"Under Modi's leadership, India's foreign policy has shifted from a traditional non-aligned stance to a pragmatic multi-alignment strategy, challenging its historical narrative of neutrality."

1.2 Research Questions

1. To what extent does the Modi administration's strategic alignment with major powers challenge the notion of India's neutrality?
2. Can India's expanding defense and economic ties with both the US and Russia sustain its claim to non-alignment in a rapidly changing global order?
3. What do India's defense agreements (QUAD, BECA, COMCASA, LEMOA) reveal about its evolving strategic alignment?
4. How has Narendra Modi's leadership reshaped India's bilateral relations with global powers, and how does his foreign policy of 'multi-alignment' redefine India's historical stance on non-alignment?

1.3 Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze the construct of a neutral and balanced foreign policy of India under Modi's administration. Accordingly, this research critically examines the strategic evolution of India's foreign policy, focusing on its transition from traditional non-alignment to a multi-alignment strategy. It explores the extent to which India's proclaimed neutrality aligns with its deepening strategic partnerships, particularly with the U.S.,

Russia, and China. The study also assesses the internal and external challenges shaping Modi's foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, it evaluates the role of India's defense agreements and strategic partnerships in redefining its diplomatic posture in a multipolar world.

The study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to examine the shifts in India's foreign policy under Narendra Modi's administration. It employs textual analysis of key foreign policy agreements, defense collaborations, and India's participation in multilateral platforms such as BRICS, SCO, and QUAD. By critically evaluating India's strategic engagements and geopolitical positioning, the research explores whether the country's proclaimed neutrality remains a practical reality or a diplomatic construct. The study relies on secondary data drawn from academic literature, government reports, policy documents, international treaties, and credible news sources. These sources were selected based on their relevance, reliability, and scholarly credibility to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of India's evolving foreign policy. Additionally, descriptive tabular data related to trade relations, defense agreements, and diplomatic engagement are referenced to support the qualitative findings.

To enhance the rigor of the analysis, the research applies thematic textual analysis, identifying recurring patterns and trends in India's diplomatic rhetoric and foreign policy decisions. This analytical process follows a deductive approach, structuring findings around the theoretical lenses of Complex Interdependence Theory and Social Constructivism. These frameworks provide a dual perspective. Where Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye) helps assess India's evolving partnerships, economic engagements, and security alliances in an interdependent global order while social constructivism (Wendt) allows for an exploration of how India's foreign policy identity, particularly its narrative of neutrality, is constructed and reshaped under Modi's leadership.

Furthermore, to strengthen validity, the study employs source triangulation, cross-referencing official documents with independent analyses to mitigate bias. Where possible, diverse perspectives—including policy reports from Western, Indian, and non-aligned sources—are incorporated to present a balanced interpretation of India's foreign policy trajectory. By integrating qualitative case studies with theoretical analysis, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of whether Modi's foreign policy represents a genuine shift from India's traditional non-alignment or a pragmatic adaptation to global power dynamics.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The research uses the theoretical framework of Complex Interdependence Theory and Social Constructivism to analyze India's foreign policy stance in contemporary global affairs. While traditional analyses of Indian foreign policy often frame it within the realist paradigm of power competition, this study emphasizes that India's contemporary strategy operates within a framework of selective alignments, economic diplomacy, and institutional engagements in an increasingly multipolar and interdependent world. This approach is best explained through Complex Interdependence Theory and Social Constructivism, as they capture both material (trade, defense agreements) and ideational (narratives of neutrality and autonomy) dimensions of India's external engagements. Developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Complex Interdependence

Theory critiques the traditional realist perspective of military power and war in international relations. Instead, it highlights the growing interdependence between states through economic, social, and political channels. The theory posits that international politics have evolved due to complex interdependence and increased economic interactions among states. While Keohane and Nye acknowledge that military forces and power balance remain essential, they argue that their significance is diminishing. In modern politics, states are interconnected through multiple layers of interaction, making international cooperation increasingly crucial compared to military conflict (Rana, 2015).

1.4.1 Complex Interdependence Theory

The theory asserts that states engage through multiple channels—including government, transnational media, and international organizations—to bolster their international standing. Indian foreign policy under Modi's administration is also characterized by the strategic use of economic cooperation, trade agreements, and diplomatic relations. This strategy enhances India's geopolitical position by exercising multichannel diplomacy through platforms such as BRICS, G20, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and I2U2. Furthermore, India's engagement in regional and global trade networks, technology transfers, and defense procurement agreements demonstrates how interdependence shapes its foreign policy. Unlike traditional alliances, India's approach under Modi reflects tactical partnerships where economic and military cooperation are leveraged without long-term strategic commitments. For instance, India's defense collaborations with both the United States (e.g., LEMOA, BECA, and COMCASA) and Russia (such as the S-400 missile system acquisition) highlight its ability to balance security dependencies while maintaining strategic flexibility.

Additionally, India prioritizes economic security within its foreign policy. Through initiatives like the Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First policy, which have significantly boosted trade, investment, technological collaborations, and infrastructure development in South Asia (Pant & Joshi, 2020), India has furthered its economic security. The theory also highlights the importance of economic and institutional interdependence. Under Modi, India has strengthened its economic ties and institutional cooperation with various global actors. Complex Interdependence Theory posits that India seeks to expand its trade and enhance its diplomatic ties through organizations like QUAD, ASEAN, SCO, BIMSTEC, and SAARC. The theory raises critical questions regarding whether India's foreign policy under Modi is genuinely neutral and balanced or has abandoned its traditional neutral stance, particularly in light of various defense agreements with the USA and Western states.

1.4.2 Social Constructivism

Developed by Alexander Wendt, Social Constructivism emphasizes the role of norms, values, and identity in shaping states' behavior. It asserts that reality is not merely an external construct but rather a product of our perception and contrasting epistemes (Mostafa, 2024). This perspective challenges the perceived neutrality of Indian foreign policy, suggesting that the narrative of neutrality is a constructed aspect of India's identity in global diplomacy. Unlike other regional actors in South Asia, India's commitment to secularism has historically shaped its

democracy and foreign policy (Khaliq, 2024). However, under Modi's leadership and changing global trends towards conservatism, religion, and populism, India's political landscape has experienced an ideological shift. This transformation resonates with patterns observed in other post-colonial states, where religious identity plays a crucial role in shaping political legitimacy and foreign policy (Khaliq, 2019).

While India's non-alignment tradition is a deeply embedded component of its policy narrative, Modi's administration has shown a tendency to align more closely with certain powers such as the USA, Israel, France, and Japan. This notion of India as a neutral actor does not accurately reflect its diplomatic reality. The principle of non-alignment was historically founded on peaceful coexistence and non-interference in military alliances. However, under Modi, India has entered into various security agreements such as QUAD, BECA, LEMOA, and GSOM. Consequently, India's diplomatic relations appear increasingly selective, favoring specific powers. By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, this research aims to elucidate whether India's neutral and balanced approach under Modi's regime is a reflection of its complex, interdependent relations with select powers or merely a socially constructed myth.

2.0 Literature Review

The Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) was initiated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru envisioned a path for India that distanced it from the superpower politics of the Cold War. Jawaharlal Nehru boldly asserted that India would not align with any military blocs. According to Nehru, "Non-Alignment is a policy in which a country avoids joining military alliances with any other state. The policy enables the state to view international issues through a neutral perspective, rather than a military one. A state must maintain an independent perspective and cultivate friendly relations with all nations." He believed that after decades of excessive interference from European powers in Asia's affairs, it was time to focus on India's own post-colonial development, free from external influence (Johnk, 1972). The Bandung Conference of 1955 was a pivotal moment in the journey towards the formal establishment of the Non-Alignment Movement. Held in Indonesia, the conference was attended by representatives of 29 African countries and 23 Asian countries. This conference laid the groundwork for the future vision of global cooperation free from the pressures of aligning with either the Western or Soviet bloc (Hussain, 2019).

2.1 Principles of Non-Alignment Movement

1. Noninterference in military alliances
2. Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity
3. Peaceful coexistence
4. Economic independence and cooperation
5. Neutrality in international affairs (Ganguly, 2015)

2.2 Indian Non-Alignment Legacy From 1947 To 2014

From the moment India gained independence, it projected itself as a non-aligned and neutral actor in global politics, pursuing a policy of balanced diplomacy. Abdul Khan, in his article, "India's Foreign Policy Through the Decades," highlights that this policy was first introduced by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was strongly influenced by the ideals of non-alignment and

peaceful coexistence (Khan, 2020). Nehru viewed the Non-Alignment Movement as a crucial element for safeguarding Indian sovereignty in a bipolar world. This movement allowed India to avoid aligning with either the USA or the USSR. Through this policy, Nehru fostered close relations with the Soviet Union—benefiting from significant military and economic assistance—while also pursuing strong relations with the USA. This approach showcased India’s pragmatic balancing act between the two superpowers. C. Raja Mohen, in “India’s Strategic Vision: Non-Alignment to Engagement,” underscores that this balance was essential for India’s foreign policy (Mohen, 2018). However, Nehru's efforts to uphold a neutral non-aligned policy faced substantial challenges. Ramesh Dutt, in his article “India’s Non-Alignment Policy: A Historical Perspective,” mentions that India did not openly support anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements in Malay and Indochina because of its reliance on British defense and economic aid. In 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the US and portrayed a pro-Western policy. The reason was that the state was unable to form economic relations with other countries (Dutt, 2019). Aarti Gupta, in her article “India’s Non-Alignment Policy: A Reassessment,” highlights that during the Korean war (1950-53), India initially supported the United States diplomatically and criticized the Soviet Union’s involvement. However, when the war progressed and Chinese troops intervened in the conflict, India's stance shifted. The Indian government then issued a statement condemning South Korea's aggression towards China and North Korea. The Soviet Union appreciated this move by India (Gupta, 2020). Despite its pro-Western leanings, India remained a neutral actor throughout the Korean War. India’s rejection of the United States’ invitation to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO)—a military alliance aimed at curtailing the spread of Soviet communism in South Asia—demonstrated India’s commitment to neutrality and its desire to avoid involvement in the global power bloc. The decision demonstrated India’s commitment to neutrality and its desire to avoid involvement in the global power bloc. Raghavan, in “India and the Cold War: The non-aligned movement Revisited,” emphasizes that after the Korean War, the Soviet bloc began forming economic ties with India. This proficient balance of ties between the Western and Soviet bloc demonstrated India's diplomatic skills and strong commitment to non-alignment stance (Raghavan, 2015).

When Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO, India openly criticized Pakistan and perceived this military alliance as a security threat. In response, Indian policymakers adjusted their foreign policy, turning towards the Soviet Union for cooperation. Khan explains two important geopolitical events that further complicated the global landscape: The Suez Canal Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. India openly condemned the military actions of Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt during the Suez Crisis. Meanwhile, it refrained from criticizing the Soviet Union’s actions in Hungary. This policy sparked strong disapproval from the United States (Khan, 2020). Dutt argues that during the Indo-China War, the Soviet Union failed to provide any support to India, while the USA and other Western powers stepped in to assist India in containing the threat posed by communist China. This lack of support from the USSR forced India to re-evaluate its foreign policy strategy. As the state was surrounded by two formidable adversaries, China and Pakistan, India sought a reliable ally capable of providing assistance when needed. India shifted

its diplomatic focus towards the West (Dutt, 2019). During this period, the USA provided over \$400 million in aid to India between 1962-1968 (Gupta, 2020). The 1965 war, marked by the United States and China's support for Pakistan, forced India to once again turn to the Soviet Union. The USSR responded by offering diplomatic support and played the role of mediator, which resulted in the signing of the Tashkent Declaration in 1966 (Dutt, 2019). When the USSR intervened in Czechoslovakia in 1968, India did not align with the West to criticize its actions. During the Arab-Israeli War, India supported the Arab states against Israel, further straining its relations with the USA (Mohen, 2018).

In his article, "Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy: Hard Realism," Cohen highlights that under Indira Gandhi's leadership, India's Foreign policy became more assertive with a clear focus on enhancing regional dominance. Cohen argues that the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 and the 1969 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation were landmarks in India's alignment with the USSR, pulling India deeper into Cold War dynamics. Gandhi's bold decision to order India's first nuclear test, Smiling Buddha, not only challenged global nuclear norms but also signaled her willingness to use military force when necessary (Cohen, 2015). Raghavan points out that in 1974, despite tensions with Pakistan, India successfully forged smooth relations with communist China through the Panshell Agreement. Following the 1971 war, as relations between the USSR and Pakistan began to shift, India openly protested against the Soviet arms supplies to Pakistan.

The article, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Overview 1947-2004," by Dr Hasan Askari, highlights that India supported the US in the war against terrorism but was dissatisfied with Pakistan's role as a frontier state in the war (Rizvi, 2004). The tenure of Atal Bihari Vajpayee was marked by strengthening relations with the United States. The signing of the US-India Civil Nuclear agreement was a significant step in deepening bilateral relations. Parnab Singh, in his article "India's Foreign policy: Historical Overview," highlights that despite India's close relations with the USA, Vajpayee also maintained strong ties with Russia, pursuing a balanced and neutral foreign policy on the international arena (Singh, 2015). Manmohan Singh's administration was focused on economic growth and multilateralism. Khan argues that Manmohan Singh pursued a strategy of enhancing economic growth and regional stability. He engaged in diplomatic negotiation and peacebuilding measures with important neighbors. Manmohan Singh also initiated bilateral trade and cross-border bus services, aimed at encouraging economic cooperation and people-to-people interaction with Pakistan. Despite the border dispute, Manmohan Singh also sought to strengthen ties with China. In 2005, India and China signed an agreement known as the "Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" aimed at boosting trade and reducing border tensions. During this time, bilateral trade significantly expanded and both states sought to manage border issues through diplomatic channels (Khan, 2020)

Sushil Chaudhary, in his article, "India's Evolving Foreign Policy Under Prime Minister Modi," examines the dramatic shift in India's foreign policy which began with the advent of the Prime Minister Modi's government. The geopolitical dynamics are changing with multiple rising powers. India has adopted a more assertive diplomatic posture, leveraging its status as one of the world's leading economies. Chaudhary argues that under Modi India's diplomatic ambitions have

expanded significantly. India has developed collaborative strategies with various international partners, focusing on leveraging diverse skills and connections to establish itself as a significant player in international politics (Chaudhary, 2023). In their work, 'The Modi Doctrine: Indian Foreign Policy Under Narendra Modi,' Ian Hall and Sumit Ganguly conclude that Modi's administration sought to realign India's foreign policy with its historical principles through policies like the Neighbourhood first and the Act East policy. Hall and Ganguly assert that Modi is enhancing India's global standing and protecting its interests by engaging with major powers. His supporters maintain that Modi has revitalized India's foreign policy, increased national pride and India's soft power, and improved relationships with key partners. Critics, however, contend that India's commitment to non-alignment has been compromised under Modi (Hall & Ganguly, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to examine the shifts in India's foreign policy under Narendra Modi's administration. It employs textual analysis of key foreign policy agreements, defence collaborations, and India's participation in multilateral platforms such as BRICS, SCO, and QUAD. By critically evaluating India's strategic engagements and geopolitical positioning, the research explores whether the country's proclaimed neutrality remains a practical reality or a diplomatic construct. The study relies on secondary data drawn from academic literature, government reports, policy documents, international treaties, and credible news sources. These sources were selected based on their relevance, reliability, and scholarly credibility to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of India's evolving foreign policy. Additionally, descriptive tabular data related to trade relations, defense agreements, and diplomatic engagement are referenced to support the qualitative findings.

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4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 India's Shift from Non-Alignment: A Pragmatic Foreign Policy Under Modi

The Indian government has already deviated from the non-alignment stance, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi missed two consecutive NAM meetings—one in Venezuela, 2016, and the other in Azerbaijan, 2019. KP Nayar, in his article 'Non-Alignment Is Still India's Foreign Policy,' highlights that during the G77 ministerial meeting in Havana, the Indian government did not send a full delegation of ministers. According to Nayar, while India continuously portrays itself as a neutral state in the international arena, its increasing involvement in frameworks like I2U2 and the European Economic Corridor suggests a shift toward deeper engagement with major powers (Nayar, 2023). Under Modi's regime, India has adopted an interest-driven foreign policy. This strategy raises debate about whether India has truly abandoned its historical stance of neutrality or if these policies are strategic responses to changing global dynamics. Critics argue that Modi is preoccupied with realist theory and only focuses on securing India's national interest. They point to defense modernization, economic diplomacy, the expanding military industry, and India's active participation in forums like QUAD, BRICS, SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and G20 as clear indicators that India is no longer adhering to its non-alignment policy.

4.2 Internal and External Challenges of India

India faces several internal challenges that have influenced its traditional non-alignment and strategic autonomy, making it increasingly difficult for the state to maintain neutrality in global affairs. These challenges include not only overt issues such as hinterland terrorism; militancy and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir; insurgency in North-East India; left-wing extremism; tensions among religious groups; Hindu–Muslim conflict; communal, caste, and ethnic tensions; regionalism; inter-state conflict; cybercrimes and disputes; and issues in border management and coastal security (Kumar & Anekant, 2019), but also more insidious problems like the erosion of public trust in institutions. This decline in trust, as noted elsewhere in the region (Abbas & Khaliq, 2024), could further deepen internal divisions and undermine the state's ability to formulate a cohesive policy response.

Additionally, as a nuclear state and the world's fifth-largest economy, India grapples with poor economic policies, insufficient funding in its domestic military-industrial base, and neglect of critical social sectors such as health and education. India failed to provide gainful employment to its massive working-age population. The state needs to generate close to 1 million jobs per month to take advantage of its youth. Unlike China, India has failed to invest in large-scale manufacturing to create well-paying factory jobs. Instead, it developed a strong service sector that can only serve a few of the population. Despite India's success in sectors like software and IT, it spends less than 1 % of its GDP on research and development (Ganguly, 2024).

India faced a complex array of external challenges. These challenges stem from geopolitical rivalries, regional disputes, and economic competition. The state has long-lasting and significant geopolitical rivalries with its close neighbors like Pakistan and China. With China, the state has border disputes over Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. On the western border, it has economic and strategic competition along with ideological differences and claims over Kashmir

with Pakistan. India also has border disputes with other neighbors like Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, which have raised its security concerns even more. In the global market, India faces trade competition with China and several emerging economies that affect its economic growth and infrastructure development. Other external issues like terrorism, climate change and cybersecurity also undermine India's sovereignty and it needs an international alliance to overcome these issues (Kumar & Anekant, 2019).

4.3 India and the USA: A Strategic Pivot in Global Power Play

Modi has played an important role in this new phase of cooperation between the US and India. Modi met President Barack Obama soon after he assumed the presidency and by June 2016, the two leaders had held four summits. Modi was the only Indian prime minister to hold this many meetings within the first two years of his tenure. Modi also invited Obama as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2015. This was a significant diplomatic gesture and turning point in this bilateral alliance contributing to strengthening defense relations and agreements on technology transfer for India's next-generation Aircraft Carrier Program. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016 marked a significant shift in US-India defense relations. The agreement facilitated military support and operations between the two states without requiring the establishment of a permanent US military base in India. India's growing alignment with the United States, particularly through QUAD, LEMOA, BECA, and COMCASA, reflects a broader shift in South Asian geopolitics that has evolved since the post-9/11 era. The restructuring of US foreign policy in South Asia, which intensified after 9/11, played a crucial role in shaping India's strategic posture (Khaliq, 2017). According to Harsh and Yogesh, the driving factor behind US-India strategic partnership is the rising influence of China. When Modi visited Japan in September 2014, for the first time, a joint US-India statement expressed concerns over China's growing territorial disputes and risk to maritime security. During Obama's visit in 2015, a cooperative approach to regional security challenges was outlined in the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean (Harsh & Yogesh, 2020).

Modi's approach is characterized by increased alignment with the US and other Western powers, especially in defense cooperation and in forming strategic partnerships. These engagements contrast with India's historical policy of maintaining balanced relations with major powers. Shivshankar Menon criticized Modi's foreign policy for its departure from the non-alignment stance of India. Menon argues that non-alignment gave India a flexible position on the international stage. These deepening defense ties with the United States through agreements like LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA represent an interest-driven foreign policy. This shift raises questions regarding India's non-alignment policy and strategic autonomy. According to Menon, closer alignment with the West could limit India's ability to act independently on the global stage (Menon, 2016).

4.4 India-China Relationship: A High-Stake Power Struggle in South Asia

The evolving dynamics between these two Asian giants have been a defining feature of Asia. Despite historical tensions, economic interdependence has grown significantly. The

burgeoning trade relationship with bilateral trade reaching billions of dollars annually has compelled China and India to adopt a pragmatic approach to their relationship, recognizing the mutual benefits of cooperation (Huchet, 2008). However, this pragmatic engagement exists alongside underlying tensions that complicate the relationship. While economic ties have strengthened, persistent security concerns still remain. India's perception of China as a threat is shaped by several factors, including the ongoing border tension and the clashes in Galwan Valley in 2020, which significantly eroded trust between the two states. Additionally, China's growing economic influence and its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) have sparked insecurity towards India's economic sovereignty and its ability to compete effectively in Asia. Furthermore, China's militarization and its increased influence in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea have created security challenges for India (Kugelman, 2023). Additionally, Indian foreign policy is sensitive to the shifting strategic environment of South Asia (Khaliq, 2012).

4.5 The Revolution of India-Russia Partnership

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Indo-Russia relationship faced challenges but was revitalized through the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2000. This partnership further deepened in 2010 with the signing of a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership, enhancing bilateral cooperation. The defense sector remains the cornerstone of this relationship, with Russia supplying about 78% of India's military hardware between 2009 and 2013 (Ray, 2024). Notable defense collaboration includes India's \$5.43 billion deal in 2018 to acquire five units of the S-400 air defense system, and the joint development of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile—a symbol of the high level of technological and defense collaboration between India and Russia. Another major defense project is the joint production of AK-203 rifles in India under the “Make in India” initiatives. Russia has been a reliable supplier of energy resources, particularly in nuclear energy. India has benefited from Russian technology in its nuclear power development through the Kudankulam nuclear power plant. In the oil and gas sector, Indian companies have invested in Russian energy projects, especially in Siberia and the Far East. Koser and Wani analyze the significance of India-Russia ties in supporting a multipolar world order. They also highlight the significant potential growth in sectors like pharmaceuticals, IT, and space technology (Koser & Wani, 2024).

Modi has actively sought to maintain close relations with Russia and has balanced India's defense collaboration despite the improving US-Indian relationship (Arif, 2021). Under the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the US president has the authority to impose sanctions on any country that enters into a major arms deal with Russia; however, Modi is confident that India's strategic partnership with the USA will not subject him to any restrictions or embargoes. The Russia-Ukraine war had major geopolitical implications for India. The state has to choose between its relationship with the US, which supported Ukraine, and its long-lasting friendship with Russia. The situation has challenged India's neutral stance. During the GLOBASEC 2022, India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar stated that India would not become entangled in Europe's problems and was not bound to choose between the U.S. axis or

the Russia-China alliance. This statement reaffirmed India's commitment to neutrality. However, Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia on July 8, 2024, sparked a controversy. To balance this, Modi visited Ukraine on 24 August 2024, demonstrating to the world that India maintained its neutral position (Anand & Devi, 2022).

4.6 India's Diplomatic Stance in Global Conflict

India has historically supported the Palestinian right to land, but under Modi's government, New Delhi's stance has notably shifted. In 2015, at the United Nations, Modi met the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but decided not to engage with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This diplomatic posture signaled a clear shift in policy. Modi also held talks with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Singapore. He has also announced a plan to visit Israel, making history as the first Indian Prime Minister to do so. Modi's policy towards Israel is motivated by both economic and strategic interests. Since Modi's election, India has bought \$662 million worth of weapons from Israel. The annual bilateral trade between the two countries has reached \$5 billion (Pethiyagoda, 2015). While Palestine offers little in terms of weapons and trade, India cannot afford to compromise its relations with Muslim countries, as their support is crucial for India to achieve a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. Moreover, India's energy security is heavily dependent on the Middle East, which accounts for 80% of its oil consumption. Hence, balancing relations with both Israel and Palestine is key to India's diplomatic strategy (Bajpae 2024). But in recent years this balanced stance has been challenged. According to the documentation from the Solidarity Network Against the Palestine Occupation (RESCOP), the recent shipment from India's Chennai port to Israel Ashdod ports contained 20 tons of rocket engine and 12.5 tons of rocket with explosive charges and 1,500kg of explosive substance and 740kg of charges and propellant for cannons (RESCOP, 2024). On 8 June 2024, Israeli warplanes attacked the Nuseirat refugee camp of the United Nations shelter in Gaza. The Quds News released a video showing the remains of the missile that bombed the camp. A label reading "Made in India" was visible on the missile pieces (Kappor, 2024; Quds News, 2024).

India's neutral stance has also been questioned in light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. The state position on the international stage displays a complex picture. While India has voted against Russian aggression in international forums like the United Nations Security Council, United Nations General Assembly, and Human Rights Council, it has avoided making clear statements criticizing Russia's actions. The reason for this uncertainty is India's sensitive geopolitical consideration. Openly opposing Moscow will push Russia closer to China and Pakistan, two of India's strategic rivals (Tellis, 2022). However, these balancing relations became challenging when a report by Al Jazeera showcased images from a battlefield in Ukraine featuring Indian artillery shells. This situation raises concerns about India's commitment to its non-alignment policy and longstanding ties with Russia. In response, India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, labeled these allegations as speculative and mischievous. This controversy brings into question the End User Agreement, as the state would be notified if Indian shells were smuggled to Ukraine. India has asserted that it had not violated any international rules but has not addressed the actual presence of Indian weapons in Ukraine, leaving the

authenticity of these claims unclear (Al Jazeera, 2024).

4.7 The Quad: India's Strategic Alliance for Counter-Balancing China

QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) has played an important role in enhancing the relationship between India and the USA. QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) has played an important role in enhancing the relationship between India and the USA. From supplying almost 0% in 2008 to \$20 billion worth of armaments, in 2024, the USA has become the largest arms supplier to India, leaving behind its traditional arms supplier, Russia. The agreement ranges from exchanging geographical information from satellites and aircraft detectors to granting access to mutual military installations. India, in recent years, has engaged in more yearly military exercises with the USA than any other state. These military engagements challenged the state's commitment to its non-alignment policy, which had shaped its neutral stance throughout the Cold War; now, India hardly speaks of non-alignment. Chellaney believes that India has aligned itself with major international alliances and has abandoned its traditional neutral policy (Chellaney, 2023). Seema and Shakshak discuss India's commitment to the Indo-Pacific economic framework. India is pursuing this commitment for two main reasons. First, by engaging in strategic alignment with multiple states, India reduces its dependency on any single state and can enhance its influence. Second, in response to China's growing influence, India seeks to maintain a balance of power in the region. The QUAD serves as an important security alliance that can help India in counterbalancing China's dominance in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea (Anand & Devi, 2024). QUAD provides India with a platform to enhance security cooperation including joint military exercises, intelligence sharing and coordinated responses to regional threats. As a member of the QUAD, India has gained increased diplomatic leverage on the global stage (Anand & Devi, 2024).

US-India strategic collaboration marks a new phase of engagement between the two largest democracies. Tellis explained that initially India's engagement with QUAD was limited; the country even hesitated to participate in ministerial-level meetings. However, after heightened tension with China during the Ladakh standoff, India began to actively participate in higher-level QUAD meetings (Tellis, 2021). The USA played a crucial role in assisting India in countering China's expanding territorial influence. The United States provided India with defense equipment and intelligence sharing on Chinese military movements in the region. Modi's administration has been pivotal in advocating for increased alignment with the US. Critics argue that these deeper alliances with the US and its allies signal a departure from the state's traditional non-alignment policy. The Chinese government perceived QUAD as an upgraded version of NATO, viewing it as a potential threat to its interests. Meanwhile, Indian foreign policymakers view the QUAD as a strategic tool to counterbalance China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), from which India has opted out. In light of the shifting global landscape, India sees limited prospects for cooperation with China, so instead it focuses on a counterbalancing strategy. Menon contends that while QUAD can affect India's strategic autonomy, closer alignment with the US and Western states could risk alienating key historical partners such as Russia and complicate India's relations with China (Menon, 2016).

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4.8 Brics and SCO: India's Multilateral Maneuver in Shifting World Order

The BRICS organization (consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), founded in 2006 as a cooperative political structure, enables its members to work together on important socioeconomic challenges while maximizing their comparative advantages for sustainable development. BRICS ensures national sovereignty while tackling important issues like equality, reducing poverty and promoting inclusive economic growth (Cai, Chen, & Wang, 2021). According to Goldman Sachs research, India's membership in BRICS indicates that the country

has the potential to play a significant role in the global market. By 2011, India was expected to contribute 14% of the world's GDP, a figure it exceeded by 4%.

According to Koser and Wani, Russia and India share a commitment to reducing Western dominance in global affairs through platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Koser & Wani, 2024). India's involvement in both BRICS and SCO enhances Modi's commitment to multilateralism while safeguarding its strategic interest and engaging with multiple global powers to shape a more inclusive global governance framework. Through BRICS, India advocates for reforms in global financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. BRICS provided India with a platform to collaborate on economic development and address key global challenges like terrorism, poverty, and climate change. Meanwhile, in the SCO, India's engagement is driven by security concerns, primarily regional stability in Central Asia. SCO enables engagement with both China and Russia. Despite tensions with China, Pardesi argues that through the SCO, the two states manage their diplomatic relations through multilateral diplomacy. SCO also enables India to strengthen its relations with Central Asian countries, which are part of India's energy security strategy (Pardesi, 2020).

4.9 Indian Economic Rise Under Modi's Administration

When Modi came into power, the Chief Minister of Gujarat criticized him for lacking expertise in foreign policy because of his conservative background. However, Modi's government has implemented influential changes in the foreign policy, reshaping India's approach to international relations, propelling India into the fastest-growing economy in the world (Pant & Joshi, 2017). The Indian economy under his administration has experienced robust growth and emerged as a key player in the global economy. The International Monetary Fund has projected a 7.5% growth rate for 2019. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, India continues to be a preferred destination for foreign direct investment.

Table 1 Trajectory of India's Economic Rise

States	GDP (USD) in 2023	Predicted Percentage of GDP rise in 2024	Predicted Percentage of GDP Rise in 2025
United States of America	27.38 trillion	2.7%	1.8%
China	17.89 trillion	5.0%	4.5%
Russia	8.022 trillion	2.9%	1.7%
India	3.57 trillion	7%	7.2%

Source: Statista (<https://www.statista.com/>)

The main reason for this economic success is the structural reforms and investment network of the Model Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), which was introduced by the Modi government in 2015. The BIT model has played an important role in attracting FDIs in the country (Cai, Chen & Wang, 2021). India in the 21st century has become the largest trading partner of the US with trade exceeding \$125 billion. Modi's plans for India's transformation which includes programs like digital India and make in India, mostly rely on US collaboration. While India, at the same

time, has also signed FTAs with Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and Japan in 2019, reflecting Modi's commitment to expanding international trade and investment

4.10 India's Military Modernization

Under Modi's administration, the state has increased its modernization efforts and enhanced its military capabilities. Tellis highlights that this defense modernization is mainly driven by India's security concerns regarding China and Pakistan. Due to this, India has increased its defense partnership with states like the US, Russia, France and Israel. These relationships have contributed to the modernization of India's military, providing advancements in missile technology, air defense systems, and naval capabilities (Tellis, 2021). India is also increasing its domestic defense production through initiatives like "Make in India" and seeks to reduce dependency on foreign military imports. The trilateral naval exercises between India, Japan, and the United States are becoming more extensive. India is also part of the Malabar series, and the US Pacific Command has collaborated on the RIMPAC Naval Exercises (Harsh & Yogesh, 2017).

India is also expanding its defense industry by playing an important role in major geopolitical conflicts like the Gaza war and the Ukraine conflict. One of the key initiatives of Prime Minister Modi has been to grow the military industry of India. By exporting weapons during conflicts, it has achieved significant success. From 2018 to 2023, India's defense sector has expanded with a remarkable \$3 billion worth of weapons export. The Ukraine war has provided a substantial boost to Indian defense exports. Between 2022 and 2024, exports from Indian companies such as Yantra, Munitions India, and Kalyani Strategic Systems increased from \$2.8 million to \$135.24 million. This indicates a significant growth in the Indian defense industry and its international reach (Al Jazeera 2024). This raises a critical argument: India's growing arms exports complicate its position at the international level, as involvement in the global arms trade risks entangling the state deeper into major geopolitical conflicts. As India becomes more involved in wars and the supply of arms, Modi's vision of expanding India's defense industry may overshadow the principles of sovereignty and longstanding non-alignment strategy. These tactics challenge India's ability to balance economic interest with its traditional diplomatic posture.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

In assessing whether the neutral and balanced approach in India's foreign policy under Modi is a myth or reality, it becomes evident that his administration has introduced some significant transformation in Indian foreign policy. Traditionally, India was seen as a proponent of non-alignment, maintaining a neutral stance in global conflicts and staying outside the ambit of formal military alliances. However, under Modi's administration, India has undertaken a marked shift in international engagement, calling into question its traditional stance of neutrality. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India actively participates in global arms trade, military exercises, and defense agreements. The principles of non-alignment stated by Nehru advocate non-interference in military alliances, respect for sovereignty, economic interdependence, and neutrality in global conflicts. These ideals have traditionally kept India away from being entangled in the power struggle of major powers and preserved India's autonomy in a polarized world. Yet,

Modi's government has increasingly diverged from these values. India's role as a defence exporter and supplier of weapons to countries engaged in international conflicts like Israel and Ukraine raises questions about its commitment to non-alignment. The supply of armaments, even when done indirectly, is a clear indication that India is moving away from its neutral stance and violating international norms. A major indication of India's shift is its growing role in multilateral security agreements. Modi sought to assert India's influence on the global stage by aligning more closely with the United States, France, Australia, the UAE, and Israel. This shift reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the evolving geopolitical landscape, driven by security concerns and economic aspirations. However, the notion of neutrality has been challenged, particularly with India's increased engagement in security agreements like Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a strategic pivot towards counterbalancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Other significant military agreements like BECA, LEMOA, GSOM, and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) with the United States portray a pro-Western policy.

Additionally, Modi's foreign policy has demonstrated a tendency to prioritize strategic interest over a strict adherence to neutrality, as seen in India's involvement in the Ukraine war and Gaza conflict. While Modi's administration continues to espouse a commitment to a balanced foreign policy, the reality is characterized by selective alignment based on strategic interest. India's involvement in defence exports, its strategic partnership and its economic interdependence on Western powers suggest that the state's foreign policy is evolving beyond its traditional non-aligned stance. India's active involvement in forums like BRICS and SCO, and initiatives like I2U2 and the European Economic Corridor, indicates a pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policy. Therefore, it can be concluded that the concept of neutrality under Modi's leadership is more of a strategy veneer rather than a genuine commitment to non-alignment. As India navigates the complexities of the 21st-century geopolitical landscape, its foreign policy will likely continue to evolve, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly multipolar world. This evolution necessitates a critical examination of the principles underpinning India's foreign policy, challenging the traditional narratives of non-alignment and neutrality in favor of a more dramatic multidimensional approach.

Amna Rahim: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Agus Wahyudi Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

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Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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