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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Strategic Autonomy: India's Record Since the Cold War

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Has multi-alignment outlived its usefulness -- or is it the only feasible posture for a middle-income power in a fractured order?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Indian Express argues that India's post-Cold War foreign policy has steadily advanced a multi-aligned, autonomous posture – holding seats simultaneously in the Quad, BRICS and SCO without subordinating to any. The record, however, is uneven: episodes in which rhetorical ambition outran delivery, and ambiguity blurred into avoidable confusion among partners. Multi-alignment remains the most realistic posture for a middle-income power in a fracturing order, but it demands discipline, communication and predictability that India has not always supplied.

FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO MULTI-ALIGNMENT

India's Cold War foreign policy was anchored in non-alignment – a doctrine that sought sovereign space outside the US-Soviet competition. With the Soviet collapse in 1991, non-alignment lost both adversary and architecture. P.V. Narasimha Rao's Look East Policy, the 1998 nuclear tests, the 2000 Vajpayee-Clinton thaw and the 2005 Indo-US civil nuclear initiative cumulatively repositioned India as a state willing to engage all poles without joining any.

The shift was formalised under successive governments as **multi-alignment**: simultaneous membership of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (revived 2017), BRICS (expanded 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and UAE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (full member since 2017, with India's presidency in 2023), the G20 (presidency 2023) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. The architecture is unique: no other major power sits at all these tables at once.

THE DEFINING TESTS

Three tests have stress-tested multi-alignment in the past decade:

- **The S-400 purchase:** India's \$5.4 billion contract for the Russian S-400 air-defence system, signed in October 2018 with deliveries from December 2021, was the first major CAATSA-relevant procurement by a strategic partner of the United States. Washington withheld sanctions; New Delhi delivered the message that *strategic autonomy* is operational, not rhetorical.
- **Russia-Ukraine:** India's abstention on key UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's 2022 invasion, combined with continued discounted Russian oil purchases, was read by Western partners as ambivalence. New Delhi defended the position as principle-driven non-bloc behaviour.
- **Israel-Hamas, October 2023 onwards:** India's evolving line – initial condemnation of terror, subsequent calls for humanitarian relief and two-state solution – traversed the spectrum without alienating any partner, but also without leading the conversation.

OPERATION SINDOOR AND THE NEW DIPLOMACY

The May 2025 cross-border strikes under Operation Sindoor, and the diplomatic outreach that followed, are the most recent test. India's communication to Quad partners, BRICS members and SCO neighbours simultaneously – with calibrated detail and consistent messaging – demonstrated the multi-alignment doctrine in operational mode. That every major power, including those formally adversarial to each other, accepted India's framing without public counter-argument is itself a foreign-policy achievement.

WHERE THE RECORD IS UNEVEN

Three areas reveal the gap between aspiration and delivery:

- **Trade:** India remains outside RCEP and has under-delivered on FTAs with the EU and UK, with negotiations stretching across multiple cycles. Multi-alignment in security has not been matched by multi-alignment in economic integration.
- **Neighbourhood:** relations with Bangladesh under interim leadership, Maldives' India-Out swings, Nepal's recurring border-map politics and Sri Lanka's debt-cycle dependencies show that great-power balancing at the global level coexists with under-investment in the immediate neighbourhood.
- **Communication:** ambiguity in declared positions is sometimes strategic; sometimes it is mistaken by partners for indecision. The cost is reputational rather than material, but it is real.

THE QUESTION AHEAD

The post-2024 order – with the second Trump administration, intensifying US-China **decoupling**, BRICS expansion and selective Western re-engagement with Russia – challenges multi-alignment in ways it has not been tested before. The doctrine works only if every pole values India enough to tolerate its other engagements. The risk is a future in which one or more poles demands exclusivity. India will have to choose whether to deepen multi-alignment or evolve a doctrine that names its priorities more sharply.

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Key arguments:

- India's transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment is a strategic-autonomy continuum, not a rupture.
- The S-400 procurement, Russia-Ukraine abstentions and Israel-Hamas balancing demonstrate the doctrine's operational viability.
- Multi-alignment in security has not been matched by multi-alignment in trade and neighbourhood diplomacy, exposing uneven delivery.
- The post-2024 international order increasingly tests the tolerance of each pole for India's simultaneous engagements elsewhere.

Counterarguments:

- Multi-alignment risks producing diluted partnerships rather than deep ones, leaving India without a true strategic ally in crisis.
- Strategic ambiguity confuses partners and is read as drift; clarity may serve Indian interests better in a polarising order.
- The S-400 episode was tolerated by Washington for geopolitical reasons; that tolerance is not permanent.

Keywords: Non-alignment, multi-alignment, Quad 2017 revival, BRICS expansion 2024, SCO India presidency 2023, S-400 / CAATSA, Russia-Ukraine UNGA abstentions, Israel-Hamas, Operation Sindoor 2025, RCEP, India-EU FTA, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

The Indian Express's view is that strategic autonomy is not a slogan but a balance sheet – one that India has so far managed with skill but not always with discipline. The next phase will require less ambiguity and more delivery: in trade, in the neighbourhood and in articulating Indian priorities to partners who increasingly want predictability from a power they take seriously.

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