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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Great-Power Competition Demands a First-Principles Foreign Policy

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"C. Raja Mohan argues India needs a first-principles foreign policy — how do you evaluate India's current multi-alignment approach, and is it strategically coherent in a bifurcating world order?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

In this op-ed, foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan argues that India's foreign policy — shaped by a legacy of non-alignment now rebranded as multi-alignment — is becoming inadequate for navigating intensifying US-China-Russia great-power competition. He calls for a 'first-principles' strategic doctrine: asking what India needs (defence indigenisation, technology access, energy security, border security) and making decisions by reference to these declared interests rather than inherited ideological positions. Multi-alignment's structural achievements — simultaneous Quad, SCO, and BRICS membership — are real, but they must be grounded in explicit interest priorities, not practiced as ideology that mistakes strategic ambiguity for strategic autonomy.

THE LEGACY OF BANDUNG

In April 1955, twenty-nine Asian and African nations gathered in Bandung, Indonesia, for a conference that would define post-colonial foreign policy for a generation. Jawaharlal Nehru was among its principal architects. The core proposition was simple: the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa need not choose between the American and Soviet camps — they could constitute a third force, non-aligned and sovereign.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), formally constituted in Belgrade in 1961, institutionalised this proposition. For India, non-alignment served a genuine strategic purpose. India lacked the military and economic capacity to confront either superpower; non-alignment preserved India's **sovereignty** at minimal cost while maximising its diplomatic leverage between two competing blocs.

The Cold War ended. The USSR dissolved in 1991. Non-alignment lost its adversary. But the instinct — do not commit; maintain equidistance; preserve options — survived, rebranded as **strategic autonomy**.

MULTI-ALIGNMENT: ARCHITECTURE AND ACHIEVEMENT

Post-Cold War Indian foreign policy evolved what analysts now call **multi-alignment**: simultaneous, active engagement with all poles of the international order, without subordination to any. The architecture is genuinely impressive:

FORUM	INDIA'S ROLE	YEAR OF ENTRY / KEY DEVELOPMENT
Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)	Full member	Revived 2017; Quad Leaders' Summit 2021
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)	Full member	Joined 2017; India's SCO presidency 2023
BRICS	Founding member	Expanded 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, UAE)
G20	Full member	India's presidency 2023 (New Delhi Summit)
Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)	Full member	Joined May 2022
IMEC	Co-signatory	Announced G20 New Delhi, September 2023

No other major power sits simultaneously at the Quad table (US-aligned security dialogue) and the SCO table (which includes China and Russia). This architecture is India's diplomatic achievement — and it has served India's interests in the post-2014 period.

THE STRESS TESTS: WHERE MULTI-ALIGNMENT HAS WORKED

Three episodes validate multi-alignment's practical utility:

The S-400 purchase: India's \$5.4 billion contract for the Russian S-400 Triumf air defence system, signed in October 2018, exposed India to potential US sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Washington ultimately withheld sanctions — the relationship's strategic value to the United States outweighed the **deterrence** signal. Deliveries proceeded from December 2021. Multi-alignment's lesson: if India is valued enough by every pole, it can make large independent decisions without paying prohibitive costs.

Russia-Ukraine: India's abstentions on key UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's February 2022 invasion — and India's continued purchase of discounted Russian crude oil — were read by Western partners as strategic ambivalence. New Delhi's consistent defence: India will not subordinate its **energy security**

or defence supply chain to any bloc's political preferences. The abstentions are defensible on pure national interest grounds.

Operation Sindoor (May 2025): India's cross-border strikes in response to the Pahalgam terrorist attack required simultaneous communication to Quad partners, SCO members, and BRICS co-members. The fact that every major power — including those formally adversarial to each other — accepted India's framing without public counter-argument validated multi-alignment's operational utility in a crisis requiring broad diplomatic management.

WHERE MULTI-ALIGNMENT IS BECOMING INSUFFICIENT

Raja Mohan's argument is not that multi-alignment has failed — it is that structural changes in the international order are creating pressures that multi-alignment, as currently practiced, cannot absorb:

The US-China technology war: The US-China semiconductor **decoupling**, accelerated under both the Biden CHIPS Act (2022) and Trump tariff regimes, is producing genuine bifurcation in supply chains. TSMC and Samsung fab investments in the United States; Chinese domestic semiconductor push under SMIC; export controls on advanced chips to China — these create a binary for every country that designs or manufactures electronics. India's semiconductor mission (India Semiconductor Mission, 2022; Tata-PSMC fab at Dholera announced 2024) has a choice: integrate with the US-aligned supply chain ecosystem or attempt to maintain bifurcated access. Multi-alignment cannot resolve this — it is an investment, infrastructure, and standards decision that requires a declared preference.

The China-Russia axis: Russia's deepening economic and military integration with China since February 2022 — Russian energy exports pivoting from Europe to China, Sino-Russian joint military exercises, technology transfers — means India's continued defence partnership with Russia increasingly involves proximity to China. Multi-alignment requires that India be comfortable sitting at the SCO table with both China (India's primary border adversary since Galwan 2020) and Russia (India's primary defence supplier). This geometry is becoming harder to sustain as the China-Russia axis hardens.

AI governance standards: The US and EU are developing AI governance frameworks (EU AI Act 2024, US Executive Order on AI 2023, G7 Hiroshima Process) that will become de facto global standards. China is developing parallel standards under its AI governance regime. India's Digital Public Infrastructure model — open-source, state-built, public-interest oriented — sits awkwardly in both frameworks. India must either lead a third path (as it has attempted to do through ITU and GPAI) or choose an alignment. Multi-alignment as ideology does not provide a decision rule.

THE FIRST-PRINCIPLES ALTERNATIVE

Raja Mohan's argument is not a call for abandoning multi-alignment — it is a call for grounding it in explicit national interest logic rather than inherited ideological positions. The first-principles exercise asks: what does India need for its stated goals of becoming a developed economy by 2047 (Viksit Bharat) and a leading power in the multipolar order?

Defence indigenisation: India cannot remain dependent on any single supplier for 60%+ of its defence equipment. First-principles: reduce import dependency, build domestic industrial base (DRDO, DPSUs, private sector), diversify suppliers. Decision rule: evaluate every defence partnership by its contribution to indigenous capability.

Technology access: Semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, space technology. First-principles: access requires being in the US-aligned technology ecosystem. This has implications for Huawei in telecom networks, for SMIC chip purchases, and for AI infrastructure choices.

Energy security: India imports 85% of its crude oil. First-principles: diversify, maintain optionality, resist pricing oneself out of any supplier relationship. This justifies Russian oil purchases, West Asian engagement, and domestic green transition investment simultaneously.

Border security with China: Galwan 2020 changed the strategic calculus. India lost 20 soldiers in the clash; disengagement was achieved in phases, with the last sectors resolved in 2024. First-principles: no economic relationship, no multilateral forum membership, and no diplomatic formula can substitute for hard deterrence capability against China on the LAC.

Market access: India's export-led growth ambitions require market access negotiations with the US (trade deal), EU (FTA), UK (FTA, signed 2024), and ASEAN — none of which are advanced by multi-alignment ideology.

MULTI-ALIGNMENT VS STRATEGIC DRIFT

The strongest counter-argument to Raja Mohan's position is that multi-alignment is not indecision — it is rational optionality preservation. A middle-income power with limited resources cannot afford to close off relationships. The S-400 episode proved that India can make large independent decisions without permanent cost. Russia-Ukraine abstentions proved that India can resist Western pressure on energy and defence without losing strategic partnerships. Operation Sindoor proved that India can act decisively and maintain all its diplomatic relationships simultaneously.

But optionality has costs. Strategic ambiguity confuses partners and is read, over time, as unreliability. The risk is not any single decision — it is the cumulative impression that India will not commit, that its partnerships are transactional but not transformational, and that no partner can confidently build its India strategy around Indian predictability.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 – India’s foreign policy; Bilateral, regional and global groupings; GS Paper 4 – Ethics of strategic decision-making

Key arguments:

- Non-alignment (1955 Bandung, 1961 NAM) was designed for Cold War bipolarity; multi-alignment is its post-Cold War update – but structural bifurcation in US-China competition is testing its limits.
- India’s multi-alignment architecture: Quad (revived 2017), SCO (full member 2017), BRICS (expansion 2024), G20 presidency 2023 – unique simultaneous membership.
- S-400/CAATSA, Russia-Ukraine abstentions, Operation Sindoor 2025 validate multi-alignment’s operational utility.
- First-principles analysis: declare non-negotiable interests (defence indigenisation, technology access, energy security, border security, market access) and make decisions by reference to these rather than by inherited ideology.
- Semiconductor supply chain bifurcation, China-Russia axis hardening, AI governance standards – three structural pressures that force choices multi-alignment alone cannot resolve.
- Strategic ambiguity is rational optionality; but sustained ambiguity generates a reputation for unreliability that reduces leverage.

Counterarguments:

- Multi-alignment is not ideology – it is rational optionality preservation for a middle-income power that cannot match any great power.
- First-principles declarations of priority alignment may close off relationships that India will need – Russia on defence, China on trade, EU on technology.
- Strategic autonomy’s value is precisely its unpredictability: partners cannot take India for granted, which maximises India’s leverage in all directions.

Keywords: Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), Bandung Conference 1955, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, Quad 2017 revival, SCO India 2017, BRICS expansion 2024, G20 New Delhi 2023, S-400 CAATSA, Russia-Ukraine UNGA abstentions, Galwan 2020, Operation Sindoor 2025, IMEC, India Semiconductor Mission 2022, Viksit Bharat 2047, first-principles foreign policy, C. Raja Mohan.

C. Raja Mohan's central insight is that multi-alignment and first-principles strategy are not opposites — but multi-alignment must be grounded in explicit interests to function as strategy rather than ideology. India has demonstrated remarkable skill in sitting at every table simultaneously; what it has not demonstrated is the discipline to declare, clearly and in advance, what it will and will not do when those tables conflict. The coming decade — with semiconductor bifurcation, AI governance standard-setting, and deepening China-Russia alignment — will force those declarations. India can make them from a position of strength, or it can be forced into them. The first-principles exercise is not abandoning multi-alignment; it is upgrading it from a diplomatic style into a strategic doctrine.

Sources: [Indian Express](#), [Ministry of External Affairs](#), [PIB](#)

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

India's foreign policy posture — shaped by non-alignment instincts now rebranded as multi-alignment — is becoming strategically inadequate as US-China bifurcation forces choices that cannot be indefinitely deferred; a first-principles recalibration grounded in clearly articulated national interests — defence indigenisation, technology access, energy security, border security, market access — would serve India better than an inherited ideological framework.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Non-alignment was designed for Cold War bipolarity and made strategic sense in 1955 Bandung; multi-alignment is its rhetorical update, but the US-China technology war and China-Russia axis hardening after 2022 are creating a structural bifurcation that makes indefinite fence-sitting increasingly costly.
- India's simultaneous membership in the Quad (US-Japan-Australia-India), SCO (China-Russia bloc), BRICS (expanded 2024), and G20 leadership represents a genuine multi-alignment achievement — but semiconductor supply chain choices, AI governance standards, and deep-sea cable routing are forcing binary decisions that multi-alignment cannot perpetually defer.
- First-principles choices are already happening: India abstained on Russia-Ukraine UNGA votes (energy and defence interests) while joining IMEC (US-aligned connectivity) — both

decisions are defensible on pure national interest grounds without reference to Non-Alignment Movement ideology.

- The risk of multi-alignment as practiced is strategic drift: appearing to every partner as a useful ally while delivering on commitments to none — reducing India's leverage precisely when it needs to be maximised.

COUNTER

Multi-alignment is not indecision — it is a rational strategy for a middle-income power that cannot match any great power's resources and must maintain operational freedom across multiple theatres simultaneously; abandoning it for declared priority alignments would close off options India cannot afford to lose.

WAY FORWARD

India should retain multi-alignment's structural architecture while injecting first-principles discipline: clearly identify the three or four interests that are non-negotiable (border security, defence technology access, energy security, trade openness), communicate these explicitly to partners, and make decisions on individual issues by reference to this declared framework rather than by case-by-case improvisation.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Critically examine India's multi-alignment strategy in the context of intensifying US-China-Russia great-power competition. Do you agree with the argument that India needs a 'first-principles' foreign policy grounded in national interest rather than inherited ideological positions? (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

C. Raja Mohan's argument — that India's foreign policy requires a 'first-principles' recalibration away from inherited non-alignment instincts toward a discipline of explicit national interest maximisation — engages the central strategic question of India's coming decade: whether multi-alignment, which has

served India well in a relatively fluid post-Cold War order, can survive the structural bifurcation that US-China great-power competition is producing.

BODY

Non-alignment was Nehru's strategic response to Cold War bipolarity: India would not subordinate itself to either superpower bloc. The Bandung Conference (1955) and Non-Aligned Movement (1961) institutionalised this position.

After 1991, non-alignment lost its adversary — the USSR — and India evolved what became known as strategic autonomy: engaging all poles without joining any. This posture reached its most sophisticated expression under the multi-alignment doctrine: simultaneous membership of the Quad (revived 2017), SCO (full member 2017), BRICS (India participated in its 2024 expansion to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and UAE), G20 (India's presidency 2023), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

The architecture is unique — no other major power sits simultaneously at all these tables. Raja Mohan's critique is not that multi-alignment is wrong in principle but that it is being practiced as ideology rather than strategy.

His 'first-principles' argument asks: what does India actually need? The answer — defence indigenisation, technology access (semiconductors, AI, space), energy security, border security with China, and market access for Indian goods and services — should determine engagement choices. By this standard, India's Russia-Ukraine abstentions are defensible (Russian S-400 deliveries, discounted oil, ongoing Kudankulam partnership), but India's resistance to deeper Quad operationalisation is harder to justify on pure interest grounds.

The semiconductor supply chain is the acid test: the US-China decoupling in this domain is producing a genuine bifurcation where Indian chipmakers, fabless design companies, and electronics manufacturers will need to choose supply chains. Multi-alignment cannot resolve this choice — only a clear statement of interest priority can.

CONCLUSION

Multi-alignment and first-principles strategy are not mutually exclusive — but the former must be grounded in the latter. India should retain its multi-stakeholder architecture while being more explicit with each partner about its non-negotiable interests.

Strategic ambiguity served India in a fluid order; as the order bifurcates, predictability and declared priorities will generate more leverage than carefully maintained opacity. First-principles discipline is not the end of multi-alignment — it is its maturation.

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