



Balancing the Boat: The Strategic Gambit Reshaping India's Global Role

How has India asserted Multi-Alignment, Strategic Autonomy, and National Interest through Russian oil trade, despite Western Pressure, and what are the Implications on India's emerging role in Shaping a Multipolar Global Order?

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Abstract

This paper analyses India's evolving foreign policy through the lens of Russian oil trade, despite geopolitical demand, post the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. The study explores India's transitioning foreign policy from the era of non-alignment to multi-alignment, and how this has helped India gain both economic and political leverage during challenging times, like the one examined in this paper. India's decision for Russian oil import was in line with its own strategic autonomy and national interest, and this assertion exemplifies India's strong foreign policy. India's firm stance of maintaining its national energy security through its tactful statesmanship diplomacy, has made India a crucial player in the multipolar global order, whilst being a strong voice of the Global South. India has actively carved the path for the multipolar global order and a stronger Global South representation. The combination of sophisticated diplomacy, active multi-alignment approach, and assertion of India's strategic autonomy has helped India to rise to be a prominent global power in the emerging multipolar order.

Keywords: *Multi-alignment; Strategic autonomy; Energy security; Russian oil; National interest; Multipolarism; Hedging theory; Global South.*

Introduction

India's foreign policy has been one of balancing the boat with conflicting global powers, whilst crafting its own path to enforce strategic autonomy and national interest. This Gambit has paved the way for its rising role as a global power in the multipolar global order. India's foreign policy has evolved from the Nehruvian era of non-alignment to multi-alignment to preserve its strategic autonomy (Vaishnav, 2023). One such scenario in which India has demonstrated this is through the Russian oil import during the Russia-Ukraine war despite western pressure and sanctions on Russia. This era had sent a message across the globe regarding India's sovereignty and foreign policy, and as being a nation that chooses its national interest regardless of what any other global power dictates India to do. By exploring India's multi-alignment approach to fulfill its national interest and have strategic autonomy, this paper aims to understand India's place and role as a rising power in the multipolar global order. Along with this, this paper aims to explore how India has actively constructed the multipolar global order and how this multipolar global order has benefited India. The argument here is that India has not just accepted the rules of the international systems, but rather that India has also been a co-author in making these rules. This argument varies from much of the existing literature on India's foreign policy analysis as this paper aims to connect multi-alignment foreign policy through the Russian oil trade in a strategically challenging period, along with analysing India's vital role in shaping the multipolar global order.

Strategic autonomy refers to a nation's ability to choose its own foreign policy outcomes and decisions based on national interest without reliance on other international power or foreign influence. The first layer of strategic autonomy concerns states interactions, preferences, decisions and practices of foreign policy to be independent and of its own interest, and the second layer is the ability to make decisions based on its own security and defence interests (Farwa, 2024). India's reliance on Russian crude for energy is at the core of a larger geopolitical conflict between alliance diplomacy and economic necessity. India has been one of the biggest purchasers of cheap Russian oil since the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, negotiating a complicated web of Western sanctions while strengthening its strategic alliance with the US through initiatives like the QUAD.



In the contemporary global system, where energy security, trade interests, and great power competition converge in ways that defy traditional foreign policy classifications, this simultaneous engagement puts India in a highly contentious position.

This paper is structured into six pieces that together form a logical and forward-thinking argument. It begins with an introduction that puts India's foreign policy predicament in perspective. The current scholarly discussions on Indian strategic behavior are then mapped out through a thematic literature review. The theoretical framework uses Hedging, Neo-Realism and Bandwagoning theory as analytical frameworks. Before the conclusion summarizes the main points and considers their wider implications for India's place in the developing multipolar world order, the analysis section looks at the evidence opposing these frameworks. In 2026, when the Russia-Ukraine conflict enters its fifth year and the United States increases secondary sanctions and pressure on nations with economic ties to Moscow, making this topic extremely relevant. India's position is now at the center of discussions over the future of the rules-based international order, the cohesiveness of Western alliances, and the agency of Global South countries. The development of multipolarity, the durability of sanctions regimes, and the ability of emerging countries to maintain independent foreign policy in an increasingly coercive global context are all directly impacted by how India handles this pressure.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into four parts, in order to explore the various aspects of the research question. First it explores Russia-India relations with relation to India's energy security, then it moves onto explaining the evolving nature of India's foreign policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment. After this, the paper explores India's strategic autonomy, national interest and the western pressure in terms of the Russian oil trade, and then lastly it examines India's possible role in cultivating the multipolar global order.

Russia-India Relations and Energy Security

One of the longest lasting alliances in the post-colonial international relations is the Russia and India relations, which has its roots in Cold War geopolitics but is constantly reimagined to further national goals. India had friendly relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War without joining any power bloc; the two key aspects of their diplomatic ties were defense and nuclear energy (Specialeurasia, 2025). This non-alignment stance was a strategic claim in and of itself, taking advantage of Soviet assistance while maintaining flexibility. An important turning point was the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, which gave India diplomatic support during the Bangladesh Liberation War and established the groundwork for sustained collaboration (Specialeurasia, 2025). During Putin's visit to India in October 2000, the two countries formally established a Strategic Partnership, and subsequently elevated it in 2010 (Britannica, 2026).

The most analytically significant development in recent bilateral history is the change in the energy relationship after 2022. Due to Western sanctions that produced Urals grade discounts and India's preference for domestic economic stability over geopolitical alignment refers to how nations position themselves diplomatically, economically, and militarily within the global order. The country's imports of Russian crude oil increased from



roughly 2.1% of total imports in 2021–2022 to an estimated 38% by April 2026 (Sharma & Nair, 2025). India maintained its energy pipeline with Moscow despite growing American pressure from the 2025 "Sanctioning Russia Act" demonstrating intentional strategic autonomy rather than being reactive (Sharma & Nair, 2025). India established its energy security as a national right, and not something that can be used for international negotiations. Beyond purchasing choices, India asserted its independence in terms of alternative financial and logistical infrastructure. With Russian exporters reinvesting Indian Rupees into infrastructure bonds and joint defense projects, the Rupee-Ruble trading system was stabilized through Special Vostro Accounts, allowing for increased trade volumes outside the US dollar-based international market (Sharma & Nair, 2025). The whole supply chain was concurrently shielded from G7-controlled banking and shipping systems by a shadow fleet of more than 600 non-western ships (Wolford, 2024). The idea of "contingent autonomy" is used to describe this (Nadaf, 2026).

India has evolved from a simple consumer of Russian goods into a strategic lifeline that provides foreign exchange and diplomatic recognition, and it has considerable power to stop a unified Russia-China bloc from marginalizing Indian interests in Central Asia (Nadaf, 2026). External affairs minister S. Jaishankar's statement that "Russia has never hurt our interests" captures the continuing strategic rationale that shields this cooperation from Western criticism, as the IDSA book confirms. The connection represents a depth of engagement fostered over fifty years (Stobdan, 2010). It is essential to view India's energy trade with Russia as a clever tool of multi-alignment and great-power balance rather than as a sign of dependency. Although the India–Russia partnership originated during the Cold War, its present-day significance extends beyond historical affinity. Contemporary foreign policy decisions are increasingly shaped by strategic autonomy, economic interests, and shifting global power dynamics.

From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

India pursued the policy of 'non-alignment' in order to avoid being dependent on the Soviet Union (USSR) or the United States of America (USA), in order to maintain its sovereignty and strategic independence during the Cold War. With the advent of a multipolar, economically interdependent world, the foreign policy of India has seen transformation in its approach which has become flexible and pragmatic. This view of the concept of 'multi-alignment' as the modern form of non-alignment is a position supported by scholars. Scholars claim that multi-alignment is not the rejection of the non-alignment concept, but it's an adaptation to the current geopolitical realities. India seeks to be seen as a player among multiple actors, like Russia, the United States, the European Union, BRICS, QUAD, Indo-Pacific partners and other nations, rather than being seen as a third world nation far removed from the major powers (Rajeev, 2025).

One key theme in the literature is India's ongoing relationship with Russia, especially when it comes to energy and lower-priced crude oil imports, following the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The researchers conclude that India's reaction to the western sanctions was in the interest of maintaining strategic autonomy and national interest instead of being ideologically aligned. The energy security and the low cost of energy became a necessity as India imports almost 85% of its oil requirements, which are essential for controlling inflation, maintaining economic growth and energy security at domestic level. In the face of criticism and pressure from the western countries, India imported considerably when it came to Russian crude oil imports after 2022 (Journal of Political Science, 2025).



At the same time, the literature highlights that India carefully balanced its relationship with Russia while continuing to strengthen ties with the United States and Europe in areas such as trade, technology, investment, and Indo-Pacific security cooperation ([Rajeev, 2025](#); [Singh, 2026](#)). This is an attempt by India to eschew rigid alliance politics and to make issue-based partnerships with various global powers. It is also pointed out that India's policy is also an expression of its larger vision of becoming an independent global player and a key voice of the Global South in the changing multipolar global landscape ([Pinto, 2024](#)).

The second argument in the literature is India's energy ties with Russia have grown beyond domestic consumption and have helped India to become a global refining hub. The availability of this cheap Russian crude helped India to domestically refine petroleum products and sell them in foreign markets, particularly in Europe, thus enhancing India's economic and geopolitical position. Some scholars also contend that this situation highlighted the paradox of Western criticism because the European states had an indirect demand for petroleum products derived from Russian crude despite their exports to India. ([Council on Foreign Relations \[CFR\], 2025](#)). India has not been completely out of the conflict in Ukraine despite remaining strong with both energy and strategic partnership with Russia. India also extended humanitarian support to Ukraine, a step to participate in peace diplomacy and always advocated dialogue and peaceful resolution of the conflict without resorting to military escalation. Meanwhile, India maintained imports of cheap Russian crude oil saying energy security, economic stability and welfare of its people continued to be primary policy concerns. This is a policy of strategic autonomy that India had followed by balancing humanitarian efforts with Ukraine with its own strategic-economic interests and maintaining ties with both sides of the conflict ([Rajeev, 2025](#); [Council on Foreign Relations \[CFR\], 2025](#)).

The literature, when taken together, indicates that India's foreign policy is not a complete break with the non-alignment policy but rather a hybrid of non-alignment and multi-alignment. India is not exceptional in its quest to balance competing interests, balancing its relationship with Russia, especially in the energy sector, with its expanding ties with the United States, the European Union and Indo Pacific groupings. The literature thus raises the issue of strategic autonomy and economic security and associations India's desire to be a representative voice of the Global South and an influential global power and to be its energy security. The response of India to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the best example of it, where continued engagement with Russia was accompanied with humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and diplomacy for dialogue and peaceful resolution. Overall, the present scholarship suggests that the adoption of multi alignment is an attempt to adapt India's historical strategic autonomy to the current multipolar and economically interdependent world. The overall picture of the literature indicates that India's shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment is part of the larger international relations transformation that sees states opting for a more flexible and flexible international approach and a greater focus on economic considerations and multiple partnerships. Thus, the goals of maintaining strategic autonomy, securing economic security and strengthening the country's role in the changing multipolar world order dictates India's foreign policy in the modern world.



Implications on Relations with West and India's Strategic Autonomy

At the heart of India's decision to increase oil imports after 2022 is a simple national interest. The west, the United States in particular, framed this action as India "funding the war". On the contrary, India's pushback was calculated and firmly promoted factual policy. Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal noted that initially India had started importing from Russia as traditional Middle Eastern supplies were being rerouted to Europe after the onset of the conflict- and that the USA had actively supported such imports at that time to stabilise the global energy market ([Al Jazeera, 2025](#)). However, the more striking counter-argument focuses on the aftermath of India's crude purchases. Indian refineries processed the Russian crude and exported products worth approximately USD 14.3 billion to the EU in 2024-25. In fact, India had become the largest supplier of refined fuel to EU countries, overtaking Saudi Arabia, which means Europe was actively importing Russian supplies just with an Indian label on it. The West critique of India "funding the war" conceals its own silent dependence on the very energy chain it denounces ([CSEP, 2025](#)). According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), the EU has paid Russia approximately \$105.6 billion for gas imports since the full scale invasion started, equal to roughly 75% of Russia's 2024 military budget, when neither Russian pipeline gas nor LNG has been subject to EU sanctions ([Al Jazeera, 2025](#)).

This double standard is key to understanding India's concept of strategic autonomy. It is not about being neutral or sitting on the fence, rather it is about making decisions based on national interest without external dictation. The United States of America (USA) and India have had tensions over this, the USA sees its altruism and expects reciprocity from India, whilst India wants to preserve its autonomy and pursue its domestic energy needs. An example of India's loss of its own autonomy happened when India stopped buying cheap oil from countries like Iran before when the US pressured them, and this cost a lot to India. India does not want to repeat the same mistake once again, and it has achieved this through its tactful diplomacy, and assertion of national interest ([Mohan & Dubey, 2026](#)).

The Trump administration imposed a 50% punitive tariff on imports on 6th August, 2025, and this included a standard 25% duty and a 25% penalty for purchasing Russian oil ([Pant & Sharma, 2025](#)). The research by Third World Quarterly indicates that U.S. tariffs failed to force changes to India's energy policy, as India is viewing all these problems through the eye of energy security, prioritizing national sovereignty, economic stability, and strategic autonomy over external pressure. The paper states that PM Modi's refusal to give in to pressure reflects India's long standing approach of strategic autonomy maintaining relationships with all major powers while making decisions based on its own national interests, not external pressure. It also highlights that tariffs often end up hurting the country that imposes them. In the case of the United States, higher tariffs can raise costs for importers, disrupt supply chains, and ultimately leave consumers paying higher prices ([Kumar, 2026](#)).



While Western sanctions might temporarily tone down India's Russian imports, and progressive diversification will secure its strategic autonomy, the core takeaway is clear- New Delhi must pursue a resilient energy strategy rather than give in to external pressure. By simultaneously partnering with Washington on ambitious trade targets like the \$500 (mission 500) initiative, safeguarding vital ties with Moscow and diplomatically resisting EU sanctions, New Delhi demonstrates the real world value of multi-alignment. Through this sophisticated diplomacy, India expands its policy options and resists the geopolitical pressure of any single power bloc ([Carnegie Endowment, 2026](#)).

However, there are some caveats to this analysis because of the dynamic nature of geopolitics in today's world. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, western sanctions, energy markets and India's relations with Russia, the United States and the European Union are still evolving and other developments like the emerging competition between the United States and China, the expansion of the BRICS and the shift in the role of the QUAD can further shape India's strategic calculations. As a result, India's multi-alignment policy may shift as a result of future changes in leadership, constraints, energy costs, wars, international relations etc. The study is also constrained by the fact that it is mainly a secondary research and the case study focused on India's energy relationship with Russia. Moreover, the notions of 'strategic autonomy' and 'multi-alignment' are multi-dimensional and hard to assess with fixed criteria. Hence, the findings would only represent the geopolitical facts and circumstances of the period under study, and not the Indian FOPs in a permanent sense.

This section directly connects the narrative of this research. The evolution of India's Foreign Policy from Nehruvian non-alignment to multi-alignment is best demonstrated by this example. The Russia-India energy relationship has become a foundation of India's ability to fight Western pressure, while buying Russian supplies ensures India's firm stand against Western demands, while exporting processed fuel back to Europe exemplifies that India is a crucial, integrated link in the global energy supply chain rather than an exception to the rule. India's ability to decide its own course while maintaining ties with rival global powers ensures it helps shift the new multipolar global order as a leading voice, rather than passively adhering to the rules set by other dominant nations ([Carnegie Endowment, 2026](#)).

India as a Constructor of the Growing Multipolar Global Order

The Multipolar global order refers to an idea wherein many countries (more than two) hold power and influence over international rules, norms and policy ([Research Centre, 2026](#)). This is significantly different from the previous unipolar and bipolar global orders because it reduces the influence of only one or two countries in international law and relations. This is especially beneficial for regions in the Global South because they can also have a relatively equal influence in global affairs, unlike in the past wherein power was held in the hands of just one or two countries. The cold war era was characterized by a bipolar global order with two major power blocks being the United States of America (USA) and Soviet Union (USSR). After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in the cold war, the world faced a “unipolar moment”, and a hegemonic global order with just the United States having major economic power, and hence, say over global norms and policies ([PolSci Institute, 2025](#)).



Scholars argued that this was temporary and no single nation holds enough power to be sustained as a single super power for long periods of time as other nations would rise to balance the super power (PolSci Institute, 2025). This claim could also signify the possibility of the current multipolar global order.

The world is now shifting away from the post-cold war unipolar world order to a more competitive, and fragmented global order, and many expect a multipolar global order. This is due to the increasing military expenditure of countries across the globe causing multipolar rivalry and a shift to a multipolar global order (Srinivas & D, 2026). Moreover, countries are defining their geo-economic actions and practices to match their national interest in terms of security, resilience and strategic rivalry (Srinivas & D, 2026). This is due to “geo-economic fragmentation” which refers to the shift away from making economic decisions like trade solely for economic reasons to a more politically aligned reason (Srinivas & D, 2026). This means that countries do not make decisions and deal with other countries based on economic benefits only, but also based on whether a country is a rival or an ally (Srinivas & D, 2026).

Scholars classify India as a ‘middle power’, and these are characterized by their diplomatic behaviour of coalition building with multiple actors, niche diplomacy in different areas like technology, energy security, defence, and a preference for bargaining power. Middle powers prefer to have a voice in major international decision making, have fluid coalitions with different blocs according to their autonomy, and concentrate their efforts on a few selected areas (Srinivas & D, 2026). Middle powers like India must ensure balanced and good relations with multiple nations and blocs, due to the increasingly politicised nature of global politics. India’s fondness towards the multipolar global order has the intention of emerging as one of the global powers (Mollestam & Saini, 2025). For India, multipolarity is a framework to secure recognition, safeguard autonomy and aid in reformation of international institutions (Mollestam & Saini, 2025). India’s challenge is to remain interlinked with countries economically to sustain growth while minimizing and removing risks associated with coercion, restrictive policies and vulnerabilities in supply chains. India’s growing economic and material capabilities, along with its continued performance even amidst uncertain global times, puts India in a position to bargain better trade deals, release funds for modernising the defense sector, and make India an attractive partner for diversification of global supply chains (Srinivas & D, 2026). India’s foreign policy approach reflects a dual role wherein it respects the existing institutional international rules and norms, but also advocates for reform and policies oriented towards the Global South (Srinivas & D, 2026). Hence, leading pathways for the Global South to integrate more seamlessly into the multipolar global order. Minilateral deals which are relatively small scale agreements between a few states, through niche diplomacy, allows for cooperative and inter-dependent growth which can lead to the acceleration of the formation of a stronger multipolar global order (Srinivas & D, 2026).

This refers to multilateral diplomacy which happens through international institutions, conferences and regional and panel institutions (Nibhani, 2024). Minilateral deals which are relatively small scale agreements between a few states, through niche diplomacy, allows for cooperative and inter-dependent growth which can lead to the acceleration of the formation of a stronger multipolar global order (Srinivas & D, 2026). The multipolar global order gives and has given rise to many competing powers, and multilateral diplomacy has become increasingly



evident. An analysis of multilateral diplomacy and multipolar global order would be that the two are closely linked as multilateral diplomacy allows for multipolar global order to be strengthened because states tend to have a larger say in different matters, and are able to put themselves on the global stage. This is because smaller countries are incorporated into the system which gives them power. This is related to India because it has been practicing multipolar diplomacy through different summits, conferences like QUAD, BRICS, United Nations, and other forums which strengthens the soft power of India in the global stage (Nibhani, 2024). Overall, the literature has helped to exemplify and analyse the link between multipolar global order and multilateral diplomacy, allowing for smaller states, especially the 'middle powers' to have a stronger holding over the multipolar global order, and India has done the same.

Theoretical Framework

The present study uses the approaches of Neo-Realism, Hedging, and Bandwagoning Theory in order to analyze the reasons why India has continued to trade with Russia despite the pressure and sanctions from the West. These theoretical lenses help to see how India is managing its quest for energy security, strategic autonomy, economic interests, and overarching ambitions in a new multipolar global order. Hedging Theory provides an explanation of how states deal with uncertainty through multiple ties with multiple powers (kuik,2008). States do not opt for either side, they opt for the greatest gains and the least risk. Neo-Realism suggests that the international system is anarchic, which is defined as a system of states without one supreme governing body. This means states have to focus on their own survival, security and economic stability, causing them to behave in the way they behave because of the system they live in rather than pure human nature (Biscontini, 2023). Bandwagoning Theory is one such theory that gives some additional insight into the ongoing economic relations between India and Russia. Bandwagoning here is understood in terms of bandwagoning for profit rather than from fear.

India is not totally on board with Russia, but some of its energy dealings signal an intent to gain economic and strategic gains from dealing with a big player in an uncertain world, but Indian action can be explained as 'selective cooperation' and not total alignment. The Indian way is more than just a material benefit; it has implications for India's standing in the Global South. India's refusal to bend to outside pressure, coupled with its independent decision-making, makes it a symbol of the developing nations which desire greater strategic autonomy in international affairs. India promotes the ideals of a more inclusive global system with greater representation of emerging powers through institutions like BRICS, G20, and other initiatives of the Global South. In this way, India's Russian oil policy is not just about energy security – it's about playing a role in the evolution of a more multipolar world order, as well as being a player between the great powers (Journal of Political Science, 2025). These three theories—Neo-Realism, Hedging Theory, and Bandwagoning Theory—combine to offer a detailed explanation of the Russian oil trade with India and its significance in terms of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, energy security, and India's emerging leadership within the Global South.



Analysis

This paper tries to show how India has developed its foreign policy through asserting its strategic autonomy and national interest by pursuing a multi-alignment policy. This analysis is crucial to understand India's stronger foreign policy and growing role in this multipolar global order. This means that it has not compromised on its own national interest, whilst trying to not completely dis-align with many players at once. India's multi-aligned approach and exertion of strategic autonomy during the Russia Ukraine war can be analysed through hedging theory. Hedging is a risk management strategy used in times of uncertainty and worsening anticipation of the international environment (Pujol, 2024). It manages competing national interests in a harmonious manner, and ensures to maximise benefits whilst having a backup plan if something goes wrong (Pujol, 2024). This is what India's foreign policy exemplifies, as has justified its oil trade with Russia in terms of strategic autonomy, cost-efficiency, and national interest, along with being a balancer of global oil price. Moreover, the maintenance of relationships with Russia, the United States, Europe, BRICS, QUAD and Indo-Pacific partners. India bought Russian oil and continued to engage in defence ties with Moscow, but also broadened its strategic ties with Western nations. This is an illustration of India's policy of being multi-aligned, which will help it maintain strategic flexibility and not become too reliant on any one player (Pinto, 2024). These results are in line with hedging theory, which maintains that in order to maintain autonomy and not be overly dependent on any one patron, middle powers deliberately use flexible, multi-vector strategies. This demonstrates that India's engagement with Russia is not a departure from its partnership with the West but a calculated hedging strategy. By simultaneously preserving strategic autonomy and maintaining ties with competing powers, India maximizes its national interests while minimizing geopolitical risks.

Furthermore, India's actions blatantly contradict the bandwagoning theory, rather than joining the potent coalition led by the west against Russia, India has continued on its own course, demonstrating the limits of Western normative influence on the Global South. India has put national interests and strategic autonomy ahead of alliance politics. India maintained diplomatic relations with Russia and sustained economic cooperation, especially in the energy sector, despite criticism from Western countries. This is an example of a pragmatic foreign policy that prioritizes cooperation based on issues over ideological alignment. India's position highlights the significance of sovereignty and multipolarity in modern international relations by showing how developing states are increasingly seeking independent decision-making. However, India's foreign policy cannot be fully explained by the rejection of bandwagoning alone. To build another layer of analysis, 'bandwagoning for profit' theory would be more suitable, than the traditional bandwagoning theory. Bandwagoning for Profit can be defined as an idea of a state wanting to do an action in order to self extend itself to gain opportunity (Schweller, 1994). This is what India has done, as it has traded the Russian crude oil for a cheaper price, along with being a middle supplier to other countries after manufacturing that oil. This has put India in a sweet spot strategically, as it was able to gain benefits through the maintenance of national energy security, and to be an exporter of cheaper manufactured oil. Neo-realism explains India's interest in continuing imports of cheap Russian crude in the midst of Western criticism and sanctions in the field of India-Russia oil relations. India, being a highly energy-intensive nation, felt that the availability of low-cost oil was a key factor in managing inflation, maintaining economic growth and assuring energy security in its future. In the neo-realist view, India's moves are driven by strategic-economic



considerations, not by ideology or human nature, and they are not necessarily oriented towards either Russia or the West (Rajeev, 2025; Singh, 2026). When the world was in turmoil and geopolitical unrest, Russia's discounted crude was vital for India's energy security, inflation management and economic growth as the nation imported almost 85% of its oil needs (Journal of Political Science, 2025). Hence, India's decision to increase Russian oil imports reflects positive bandwagoning driven by economic gains rather than ideological alignment. The relationship illustrates how material incentives can shape foreign policy choices while reinforcing India's energy security and economic resilience.

Extending the idea of neo-realism allows us to build a stronger understanding of India's rising role in the multipolar global order. Neo-Realism explains that states protect themselves and are seen as self-interest maximising because of the structure of the anarchic global order. This means that there is no overarching power that protects any state, and that the power is unevenly distributed amongst the states, which in turn, shapes their behavior (EBSCO, 2020). This is something that the emerging multipolar global order tries to fix, as the unipolar or the bipolar global order polarises the power in the hands of a few, but multipolarism allows for the power to be distributed across the globe. Countries like India, are pushing for Global South representation and influence over international law and decision making that affects all states. Through multilateralism, India is able to pursue and craft a more multipolar global order as states would be able to have a seat at the decision making tables like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India's Russian oil trade during the war, exhibits its rising role as a Global South power, as it has rejected the western pressure, and rather asserted its own strategic autonomy to be a priority. This is in line with neo-realism as India's actions are in line with the need for survival, not just because of human nature. India's strong stance and action sends a message to the whole world that, once suppressed, colonised countries are no longer under western pressure, and are willing and capable to act on the basis of strategic autonomy and national interest. As the External Affairs Minister of India said in an interview, "Europe's problems are" not "the world's problems" (The Hindu, 2023). This does not go to say that India does not care about the west or other countries, but rather a message that through policies like multi-alignment, and its reinforcement of strategic autonomy, it aims to bridge the gap between the national interest and the global alliance. This is to create a realm wherein no one is harmed, but rather everyone can work together without jeopardizing their own power and autonomy. From a neorealist perspective, India's energy diplomacy is fundamentally guided by the pursuit of relative power and national survival in an anarchic international system. The Russia oil relationship therefore represents a strategic response to changing global power dynamics rather than merely an economic partnership.

Conclusion

India's Foreign Policy has evolved immensely. It has shifted into a multi-alignment strategy, most clearly demonstrated through the hedging theory- a risk management approach where a state safeguards its interest through multiple relationships without over-aligned to a single power bloc. Rather than being biased, India maintained its energy and defense ties with Russia, while also strengthening partnerships with Western nations, Indo-Pacific partners and QUAD members. This flexibility secures strategic autonomy and also prevents dependence on a single party. The hedging theory approach is contradictory to the traditional bandwagoning



theory, because India abstained from joining the US-led coalition against Russia despite intense geopolitical pressure. Instead, India followed a 'bandwagoning for profit' logic importing cheap Russian crude oil, refining and re-exporting it into the global markets, and turning geopolitical strain into economic leverage. Neo-realism supports this reading further, India being a country who imports nearly 85% of its oil needs, its decisions were guided by energy security, economic gain and inflation check, rather than ideological considerations. These decisions also reflect India's long term vision in a transforming global order. Neo-Realism suggests that power in a decentralised world is disproportionately distributed and multipolarity corrects it by distributing influence more widely. India's resistance to the West sends a rather powerful message to the Global south that putting first your own national interests is entirely possible and legitimate. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has said, "Europe's problems are" not "the world's problems", conveying India's message that multi-alignment allows nations to prioritise national interest without causing harm to others, simultaneously warning a respectful position at global decision making tables.

This topic is timely, and incorporates analysis of the Indian foreign policy at a crucial time period for India's strategic diplomacy, being India's Russian oil trade during a time wherein the world sanctioned it. The study also analyses the evolving nature of Indian foreign policy from the post colonised era of non-alignment to the current era of multi-alignment. Moreover, a brief analysis of India's rising role in crafting the multipolar global order through Global South leadership helps to see what India is doing right and where it can improve. In terms of prospects of future studies, this study points to a number of significant avenues for future research. The rupee-ruble account system's long-term sustainability as a scalable substitute for dollar-denominated trade should be investigated in future studies, especially in light of the growing BRICS+ framework (Sharma, S., & Nair 2025). Additionally, researchers could look into how India's green energy transition, through the National Green Hydrogen Mission, will strategically lessen its reliance on Russian hydrocarbons without causing price shocks at home. More research can also be done on the Russia-China-India triangle, particularly on how India's advantageous negotiating position with Moscow may be weakened by expanding Sino-Russian energy connections. In order to ensure that the current energy partnership with Russia serves as a transitional bridge toward true Atmanirbharta energy self-reliance rather than solidifying long-term dependency, policymakers should also systematically direct Urals discount savings into strategic petroleum reserves and renewable energy infrastructure (Sharma, S., & Nair, A. 2025). Additionally, researchers could look into how India's green energy transition, through the National Green Hydrogen Mission, will strategically lessen its reliance on Russian hydrocarbons without causing price shocks at home. More research can also be done on the Russia-China-India triangle, particularly on how India's advantageous negotiating position with Moscow may be weakened by expanding Sino-Russian energy connections. In order to ensure that the current energy partnership with Russia serves as a transitional bridge toward true Atmanirbharta energy self-reliance rather than solidifying long-term dependency, policymakers should also systematically direct Urals discount savings into strategic petroleum reserves and renewable energy infrastructure (Sharma, S., & Nair, A. 2025).



More globally, this case illustrates the limitations of the traditional dichotomy of alignment versus non-alignment in the understanding of international relations today. The era of multi-alignment seems constrained by the rigid dichotomy of aligning with one power bloc against another. The notion of multi-alignment in today's geopolitical context, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, growing competition between the United States and China, and the strengthening of strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, is more of a flexible approach to maintaining state autonomy while aligning with competing power centres. India's experience indicates that emerging powers can assert their agency in a multipolar world by building partnerships for issues, rather than long-term alliances to a specific bloc. This is not only applicable for India – it is also relevant for the rest of the Global South – as it is clear that the state can move away from bloc politics and build the nation's goals into the new international order, allowing it to be more plural and decentralized.

The Indian-Russian oil link is a reflection of the changes in the global system and the increasing importance of India in it. India has emerged as a player who is balancing partnerships of competing visions, and whose voice is becoming more significant in the multipolar world order, resisting rigid bloc politics (MEIG, 2024; Singh, 2026). The case captures the process of how emerging powers can seek their own agenda and also help in creating a more diversified and inclusive global governance. In the future, India will continue to follow the policy of multi-alignment while diversifying energy sources and establishing strategic partnerships with various power centres. India's capacity to manage national interests, economic priorities, and diplomacy further enhance its role as a key Global South player and one of the main players in future international governance, as the global order turns multipolar (Rajeev, 2025; Singh, 2026). India is a prominent constructor of the evolving multipolar global order, and a strong foreign policy that exerts strategic autonomy through multi-alignment allows India to grow to be a vital voice of the Global South.



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