



India's Multi-Alignment

Choosing a Multipolar World or
Partnering with Like-Minded Countries?

IZUYAMA Marie

Chapter 7

U.S.-India summit (February 2025)
(Photo: EPN/Newscom/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

This chapter conceptualizes India's multi-alignment as a bundle of two policies: engaging in multilateral institutions and forums and leveraging strategic partnerships. India's earlier strategic partnerships contained an element of guarding against U.S. unilateralism, but from 2000 onward India also deepened its partnership with the United States in pursuit of U.S. "recognition," hence admission to the club of great powers. Within BRICS, its principal vehicle for global multi-alignment, India invokes a "multipolar world" and presses for reform of the international financial order and the United Nations. In the Indo-Pacific, however, India sets aside its "multipolar world" discourse and behaves as a like-minded partner. Through its engagement with Singapore, India has advanced naval cooperation with the United States and its allies while steadily building up joint patrols with Indonesia and Thailand. India's multi-alignment in the maritime security domain has developed along its own trajectory, one that cannot be reduced to mere competition with China in the region.

Introduction

Indian “multi-alignment” and the related notions of a “multipolar world” and “strategic autonomy,” tend to be regarded with suspicion by the United States and its like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. India occupies a key place in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision as a country that shares values and interests with Japan in the region. Maritime security cooperation among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, which originated in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, has matured into the Malabar naval exercise that the four countries now conduct jointly. The Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Strategic Dialogue (Quad) was reactivated in 2017, and summit-level meetings were held several times. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, India abstained from resolutions condemning Russia and expanded its purchases of Russian oil, exposing differences with Japan, the United States, and Australia. Against the backdrop of a deepening rift between the United States and Europe on one side and Russia and China on the other over the war in Ukraine, Japanese commentators have also voiced frustration: “Why does India participate in the Quad while also belonging to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)?” Even so, as long as competition with China remained the priority, the United States tolerated India’s autonomous behavior.¹

This environment changed abruptly amid tariff negotiations. India’s trade surplus with the United States in 2024 stood at \$41.5 billion, smaller than Japan’s and ranking eleventh in the world.² Under the country specific reciprocal tariff rates announced by President Donald Trump in April 2025, India was adjusted a 26% tariff. On August 6, 2025, however, President Trump announced an additional 25% tariff on the grounds that India’s purchases of Russian oil were undermining U.S. policy toward Russia.³ Earlier, at the BRICS summit held in Rio de Janeiro in July, the member states had issued a statement expressing “serious concerns” over “unilateral

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- 1) Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “India and the Global Balance of Power,” *Project Syndicate*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-us-china-balance-of-power-without-formal-alliance-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-06>.
 - 2) “US Trade Deficit by Country 2025,” *World Population Review*, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/us-trade-deficit-by-country>.
 - 3) [U.S.] White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Addresses Threats to the United States by the Government of the Russian Federation,” August 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/factsheets/2025/08/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-addresses-threats-to-the-united-states-by-the-government-of-the-russian-federation/>.

tariff measures,” prompting President Trump to declare that he would impose a 10% tariff on BRICS members.⁴ President Trump’s politicization of tariffs has caused a sensation in the Indian media.⁵

At the root of the deterioration in U.S.-India relations lies the Trump administration’s denial to tolerate the strategic autonomy that previous U.S. administrations had been willing to overlook. Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has voiced disappointment that India, while developing its bilateral relationship with the United States, also aligns with anti-American states and groupings that include such states, concluding that India’s pursuit of a “multipolar world” is a misguided policy inimical to Indian interests.⁶

Why does India’s multi-alignment displease the Trump administration? More fundamentally, what is India’s multi-alignment? This chapter examines the meaning of India’s multi-alignment by relating it to changes in India’s position within the “liberal international order.”

1. Multi-Alignment, Multipolar World, and Strategic Autonomy

This section clarifies what is meant by multi-alignment, multipolar world, and strategic autonomy. After defining the terms, it considers how they relate to one another and what their policy implications are.

“Multi-alignment” is not a term used officially in the annual reports of India’s Ministry of External Affairs or in its various policy documents. External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, however, uses the term frequently in his speeches.⁷ The concept is laid out in his book *The India Way*, which was published in 2020. There he argues that multi-alignment “appears more energetic and participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement,” adding that it might also

4) Stanly Johny, “Trump vs BRICS,” *The Hindu*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-view-from-india-newsletter-trump-vs-brics/article69810598.ece>.

5) Through October 2025, the Indian press repeatedly reported, almost daily, on President Trump’s frequent declarations that “BRICS is attacking the dollar.”

6) Ashley Tellis, *Multipolar Dreams, Bipolar Realities: India’s Great Power Future* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep72438.3>.

7) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Transcript of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, in Conversation with Mariano-Florentino (Tino) Cuéllar of Carnegie Endowment, Washington DC (October 2, 2024),” October 2, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/38364/>.

appear opportunistic, whereas India is really seeking strategic convergence rather than tactical convenience.”⁸ He also notes that multi-alignment cannot be set forth as a single catch phrase for Indian policy, but it is one description of India's response to global uncertainty.

The figure who characterized the foreign policy of the Narendra Modi administration as “multi-alignment” and gave the term wide currency is Ian Hall of Griffith University. Hall argues that multi-alignment did not begin abruptly under Modi but had been a consensus among India's foreign policy elite for at least the previous decade. He treats multi-alignment systematically as a bundle of three policies. The first is bids for a range of multilateral institutions and forums. The second is pursuit of formal and informal partnerships, particularly “strategic partnerships.” The third is an avoidance to commit to any normative agenda such as liberal economic norms or humanitarian intervention, which Hall calls “normative hedging.”⁹ Based on Hall's thesis, “multi-alignment” is widely used as an analytical concept among scholars.

The “multipolar world,” by contrast, has long been used in various Indian diplomatic documents to describe a policy goal, and in recent years it has also been used to describe the reality of the world. Among the earliest appearances of the term in Indian diplomatic documents are the strategic partnerships established with France in 1998 and with Russia in 2000.

The original text of the India-France strategic partnership has not been made public,¹⁰ but according to the 2024 joint statement issued by the two leaders, the partnership was based on “strong belief in sovereignty and strategic autonomy, a shared commitment to a multipolar world, to the rule of law and the principles of the UN Charter.”¹¹ The India-Russia strategic partnership took as its point of departure “the need to build a multipolar global structure based on the sovereign equality of all states and peoples,

8) S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), 103.

9) Ian Hall, “Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi,” *Round Table* 105, no. 3 (2016): 271-286.

10) Not only is the document no longer available online, but the Indian Ministry of External Affairs annual report from that period, despite its extensive coverage of the leaders' mutual visits, makes no mention whatsoever of the conclusion of the strategic partnership.

11) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “India-France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25-26 January 2024),” January 26, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/>.

democratic values, and justice.”¹²

What the two strategic partnerships had in common was their stance toward India’s nuclear tests of May 1998.¹³ Both France and Russia distanced themselves from the U.S. approach of imposing sanctions to halt nuclear development. After India’s first nuclear test in 1974, when the United States suspended all nuclear cooperation, including supply of fuel, France and Russia continued nuclear cooperation with India. Following the 1998 tests, Russia agreed to rejuvenate construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, a Soviet-era project that had been left dormant. France, for its part, agreed in 1999 to exchange information and cooperate on nuclear safety.

The strategic partnership with France was set in motion in January 1998, when President Jacques Chirac was invited as the chief guest on India’s Republic Day. After the nuclear tests, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited France, and the strengthening of relations accelerated. In 1999 a strategic dialogue, a working group on energy issues, ministerial consultations, and a high-level committee on defense equipment were established or revived in rapid succession. Defense cooperation and nuclear cooperation became the pillars of the strategic partnership. The theme of the symposium held in 2000 alongside the ministerial-level India-France Forum was “India and France in a Multipolar World.”¹⁴ However, apart from the common position of distancing themselves from what India termed the “sanctions regime” on India’s nuclear tests, it remains unclear what image of a “multipolar world” the two countries actually shared.

The “multipolar world” envisaged with Russia rests on a clearer understanding: countering a unipolar world under the U.S. dominance. In India, President Vladimir Putin is credited with correcting the pro-American course of Boris Yeltsin and returning to the strategic partnership with India.¹⁵ The catalyst for U-turn was the bombing of Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). India and Russia shared a concern over bombings without the authorization of the United Nations and over the standardization of “humanitarian intervention.”

12) “Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation,” Free Republic, October 3, 2000. Downloaded and printed on January 27, 2005, from the U.S. news site Free Republic; the link is currently broken.

13) External Affairs Minister Jaishankar himself refers to France’s “exceptional response.” Jaishankar, *The India Way*, 125.

14) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1998–1999; 1999–2000.

15) Vinay Kaura, “India’s Changing Relationship with Russia: Challenges and Convergences,” *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 1 (2018): 48–60, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2018.1447851.

After September 11, 2001, Russia and India also shared, to some extent, uneasiness over U.S. unilateralism or the “unipolar world.” In September 2001, on Russia’s initiative, the first Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting was convened. The joint communiqué issued at the fourth RIC foreign ministers’ meeting in Vladivostok in June 2005 opened with a statement of their shared view of the international order and of cooperation toward a “multipolar world.” It identified the “democratization of international relations” and “international law, equity, and mutual respect” as common approaches and reaffirmed the importance of the role of the United Nations.¹⁶ Although the RIC cooperation aimed at “global multipolarization” was declared to be “not targeted against any other country,”¹⁷ it was clearly incompatible with the idea of U.S. preeminence.



The leaders of China, Russia, and India at the SCO summit (September 2025) (Photo: EPN/Newscom/Kyodo News Images)

Finally, “strategic autonomy,” which is connected to both “multi-alignment” and “multipolar world,” is a policy term but is not used frequently. The Ministry of External Affairs annual report for fiscal year 2018 stated that “with strategic autonomy at its core, India continued to step up its engagement with all the major powers of the world, taking independent decisions in the national interest.”¹⁸ From this point onward, “engagement with all the major powers” became a recurring theme. The annual report cited Russia, the United States, China, and Japan as examples of major powers with which India was engaged, but in his speech at the IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi singled out Russia, the United States, and China. In that speech, Modi cited India’s Strategic Partnership with Russia, which has “matured to be

16) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Communiqué on the Results of the Informal Trilateral Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of India, Russia and China,” June 2, 2005, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2596/>.

17) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of India and the Russian Federation,” October 24, 2007, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?5926/>.

18) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2018–2019, 5.

special and privileged,” as a measure of its strategic autonomy. At the same time, he described the global strategic partnership with the United States as having “overcome the hesitations of history.” With regards to China, he indicated cooperation is expanding as the countries are “the world’s two most populous countries and among the fastest growing major economies.”¹⁹ This expressed India’s confidence that, independently of U.S.-China rivalry, it could maintain favorable bilateral relations with all three great powers simultaneously.

2. Evolution of the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership

(1) U.S. Recognition: From Parity with Pakistan to Parity with China

This section traces the development of the U.S.-India strategic partnership in relation to India’s self-image of its status in the international order.

The departure of the U.S.-India relationship from their Cold War “estranged relationship” and “cold peace” toward their contemporary strategic partnership was President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000. From the U.S. perspective, this was a period in which Washington shifted toward engagement with India in order to offset the prospect of China and Iran becoming dominant powers in the region.

In a 1999 report titled *Asia 2025*, released by the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense, India was identified as a partner with whom the United States should engage to “preempt” its aligning with China or Iran.²⁰ From the Indian perspective, the U.S. should address India’s “grievances” and “recognize” India as a rising power and potential partner as a precondition for building trust.²¹

The grievances of India’s case meant lack of understanding on the U.S. side, or failure to take seriously the security concerns India had long held vis a vis China and Pakistan. With respect to perceptions of China, India’s

19) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018),” June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

20) [U.S.] Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for Net Assessment, *Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) 1999 Summer Study Final Report, ASIA 2025*, July 25–August 4, 1999, 137–140.

21) On recognition, see Pål Røren, “The Power of Recognition: Rethinking the Instrumentality of Status in World Politics,” *International Affairs* 101, no. 3 (2025): 987–1004. On grievance, see Sanjay Pulipaka, “Conflict, World Order and the Politics of Grievance,” Politeia Research Foundation, October 20, 2023, <https://prfworld.org/conflict-world-order-and-the-politics-of-grievance/>.

concerns were understood by the United States for the first time during the bilateral negotiations that followed the 1998 nuclear tests. Immediately after the tests, Prime Minister Vajpayee cited China in his letter to President Clinton as one of the reasons that had led India to test, but the United States initially gave this little credence.²² Through intensive consultations between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, however, the United States came to acknowledge India's concerns about China, which in turn made it possible for India to open up to the United States.²³ As for perceptions of Pakistan, U.S. understanding was indicated during the 1999 Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Washington seeking U.S. mediation, but President Clinton demanded an unconditional withdrawal, putting an onus on Pakistan.²⁴ This also meant that the United States now recognized the infiltration of militants from Pakistan into India-administered Kashmir that India had long appealed. India's nuclear tests and the Kargil crisis became turning points in U.S.-India relations. From this point onward, the United States began the decoupling of India from Pakistan, which is often cited as "de-hyphenation."²⁵

In March 2000, Clinton became the first U.S. president to visit India in twenty-two years, and the joint statement with Prime Minister Vajpayee titled "U.S.-India Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century" was issued which transformed the Cold War-era U.S.-India relationship to a new partnership of shared ideals.²⁶ The statement opened by declaring that "we are two of the world's largest democracies" and maintained that "freedom and democracy are the strongest bases for both peace and prosperity," emphasizing that the U.S.-India partnership was grounded in the shared value of democracy.²⁷

22) Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 53-54.

23) Talbott, *Engaging India*, 148.

24) Bruce Riedel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House," in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, ed. Peter R. Lavoy (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 137-143.

25) The term refers to not joining India and Pakistan with a "hyphen," that is, not treating the two countries as equivalent. Deputy Secretary of State Talbott was directly petitioned on hyphenation by External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. Talbott, *Engaging India*, 85.

26) Donald Camp, "The Clinton Visit: 25 Years after 'Resetting' the US-India Relationship," *The Week*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2025/03/27/the-clinton-visit-25-years-after-resetting-the-us-india-relationship.html>.

27) [U.S.] Department of State, Archives, "Joint U.S.-India Statement," March 21, 2000, https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/human_rights/democracy/fs_000321_us_india.html.

The U.S. reassessment of India's "democracy" took place in two contexts: democracy versus authoritarianism as a question of political regime, and "religious freedom" or the "separation of religion and state" versus religious extremism and fundamentalism. Bluntly stated, this was a reassessment of Indian democracy defined in contrast to China, Iran, and Pakistan.

The U.S.-India partnership also looked beyond bilateral issues toward "shared responsibility" in global governance. Specifically, the partnership took up terrorism, UN peacekeeping, and nuclear non-proliferation. It emerged from the convergence of two motives: the U.S. new policy orientation to integrate India into the global order as a "responsible state" alongside, or in place of, China; and India's reception of this new policy orientation as "recognition" of its rise.

(2) India Aiming for the High Table: A Search for a New Relationship with the United States

For India, the deepening of the strategic partnership with the United States offered a path to elevate its status from being managed as a developing country to taking a seat at the negotiating table on equal terms with developed countries to set the rules. Concurrently, India was emerging as one of the attractive high-growth economies given the name BRICs,²⁸ within which India obtained parity with China rather than with Pakistan.

On July 18, 2005, the U.S. administration under George W. Bush gave a nod to start negotiations for nuclear cooperation with India. This was a major shift in U.S. non-proliferation policy toward India, and because it required congressional approval and the consensus in the international non-proliferation regime, it took the form of a reciprocal promise between the President and the Prime Minister. Even so, Bush and Manmohan Singh laid the groundwork for nuclear cooperation. In the joint statement issued at the summit, President Bush called India "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology" and declared that India should enjoy the benefits and

28) The term "BRICs" first appeared in the 2001 Goldman Sachs report. Jim O'Neill, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper, no. 66 (2001), <https://www.goldmansachs.com/pdfs/insights/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>. This chapter uses "BRICs" for the period before South Africa's accession in 2011.

privileges befitting that status.²⁹ In October 2008, the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement was finally signed. As the term “nuclear deal” suggests, the agreement also had a transactional dimension: in exchange for U.S. recognition of India’s exceptional status under the non-proliferation regime, India would cooperate with U.S. global strategy. Thus, India was granted a status equivalent to that of a nuclear-weapon state, and got access not only to nuclear technology but also to dual-use technologies.

The year 2008 thus marked the opening of India’s ascent towards global status. In November, the inaugural G20 summit was held in Washington, and India participated alongside Russia (a member of the G8), China, Brazil, and others. This was the moment at which it was recognized that the cooperation of emerging economies was indispensable to the reconstruction of the international financial and economic system in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.³⁰ Having effectively achieved the status of a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state and gained an opportunity to participate in international financial decision-making facing the G7 across the same table, India next sought U.S. recognition in support of permanent membership on the UN Security Council. The U.S.-India joint statement of November 2009 referred to UN Security Council reform, and the joint statement of November 2010 went further, calling for reform that “includes India as a permanent member.”³¹

While the United States thus recognized India’s status elevation, initiating nuclear cooperation, providing equipment, and signaling support for permanent membership on the UN Security Council, friction between India and China was increasing along the land border and at sea, as discussed in the next section. Against this backdrop, an eminent persons’ report titled

29) [U.S.] White House, “Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,” July 18, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/pr/2005/49763.htm>.

30) On the attempt to integrate emerging economies into the existing international system through the G20, see Axel Berger, Andrew F. Cooper, and Sven Grimm, “A Decade of G20 Summitry: Assessing the Benefits, Limitations and Future of Global Club Governance in Turbulent Times,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2009), DOI: 10.1080/10220461.2019.1705889.

31) [U.S.] Government Publishing Office (GPO), “Joint Statement by the United States of America and India: Partnership for a Better World,” November 24, 2009, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-200900947/pdf/DCPD-200900947.pdf>; [U.S.] White House, “Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Singh of India,” November 8, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/joint-statement-president-obama-and-prime-minister-singh-india>.

Non-Alignment 2.0, released in 2012, seriously considered the possibility of an alliance with the United States. The report observed that, because India's interests were shaped more decisively by "direct competition" with China than by relations with the United States, it might seem natural to imagine the United States as an "alliance partner." It rejected this conclusion as premature, however, citing the risk that an improvement in U.S.-China relations could come at the expense of U.S.-India relations and the uncertainty of how the United States would actually respond when China posed a threat to Indian interests. The report further pointed to the possibility that the United States can be "too demanding" in its friendship and "resentful" of India's friendly relations with other countries.³²

This skepticism toward alliances, and especially the distrust of having one's relations with other countries constrained by the United States, has not been dispelled today. In a recent interview, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar dismissed the alliance model, stating that what suits the new era is something more like "a gathering without legal or contractual obligations," like a "club," and that "treaty-based concepts are typical of the old order."³³

3. Multi-Alignment at the Global Level: BRICS and the Aspiration for a Multipolar World

The multilateral forums at the global level that India today values most are BRICS and the G20.³⁴ Whether BRICS is a revolutionary challenge to the liberal international order or a reformist complement to the existing order has been debated for the past decade. Certainly, the BRICS narrative, with its goal of a "multipolar world," has an anti-Western dimension. Yet BRICS also has another dimension for India: a platform through which to obtain recognition from the West, specifically an admission to the rule-makers' "club" of the G7-centered international economic order.

From the Indian perspective, the genealogy of BRICS combines both impulses: the former represented by the trilateral foreign ministers' consultation among Russia, India, and China (RIC), launched in 2001, and the latter by the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), launched in 2003. The annual reports of India's Ministry of External

32) Sunil Khilnani et al., *Non-Alignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century* (Centre for Policy Research, 2012), 32.

33) *Financial Times*, March 14, 2025.

34) S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (Rupa Publications India, 2024), 106.

Affairs suggest, however, that it was the latter line, namely the policy coordination among the leaders of India, Brazil, and South Africa who had been invited to the G8 Évian Summit, that became the template for BRICs.

In July 2008, on the sidelines of the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit, to which India had also been invited, a meeting of BRICs leaders was convened on Russia's initiative.³⁵ At the inaugural G20 summit held in Washington in November of the same year, the leaders of Russia, India, China, and Brazil also met. In June 2009, the first BRICs leaders' summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, alongside the SCO summit.³⁶ Because the inauguration of BRICs was thus closely tied to the launch of the G20 summit process, coordinating positions in the G20 was set as a BRICs objective from the outset.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs categorizes BRICS as “multilateral economic relations” in its annual reports. This label reflects India's view on BRICS as neither a rigid organization nor an economic bloc. India has chaired BRICS three times (in 2012, 2016, and 2021), and the period up to around 2016 was when its expectations of BRICS were at their height. In the background were the expansion of bilateral economic ties with China as well as bilateral cooperation on the global agenda. China-India trade grew roughly twentyfold, from \$2.9 billion in 2001 to \$65.8 billion in 2012.³⁷ The year 2012 was designated the “Year of India-China Friendship and Cooperation,” and there was an expectation that the two countries would rise together on the basis of economic interdependence. Building on China-India economic engagement, BRICS achieved establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and agreement on the Contingent Reserve



BRICS Summit (July 2025) (Photo: Prime Ministers Office/Press Inf/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

35) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2008–2009, 129.

36) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2009–2010, 132.

37) [India] Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Export Import Data Bank, accessed December 5, 2018. See also Jagannath Panda, *India-China Relations: Politics of Resources, Identity and Authority in a Multipolar World Order* (Routledge, 2017), 231.

Arrangement (CRA).³⁸ The declaration of the BRICS Delhi Summit of 2012 explicitly expressed dissatisfaction with delays in the reform of International Monetary Fund (IMF) quotas and put specific demands regarding the appointment of the World Bank president.³⁹ When IMF quotas were revised in 2016, India's voting share rose from 2.3% to 2.6% (China's rose from 3.8% to 6.1%). Indian commentators interpret this IMF reform as a result of pressure exerted through the establishment of the NDB and the CRA.⁴⁰

After the 2017 military crisis between China and India in Doklam, in Bhutanese territory, India heightened its wariness toward China's "Belt and Road Initiative."⁴¹ Then, in June 2020, a military clash in the Galwan Valley left casualties on both sides severely damaged bilateral trust. Even so, hosting the 13th BRICS Summit in September 2021, India rallied BRICS in defense of a United Nations that had become dysfunctional under the pandemic. At the foreign ministers' meeting held online ahead of the summit, a joint statement on "Strengthening and Reforming the Multilateral System" was adopted. The joint statement declared a commitment to multilateralism through international law and to the centrality of the United Nations in the international system. It also touched on points sensitive to BRICS members, including that only the UN Security Council holds the authority to impose sanctions, and that there must be no double standards in promoting international law, democracy, the right to development, and non-interference in internal affairs.⁴² The Delhi Summit declaration (issued online) also prioritized "strengthening and reforming the multilateral system" next only to COVID-19 and global health.⁴³ The direction of reform aspired

38) On the NDB and CRA, see Sekine Eiichi, "Yurashia tairiku ni okeru takokukan no wakugumi no moto de no Chugoku no kinyu kyoryoku doko" [Trends in China's financial cooperation under multilateral frameworks on the Eurasian continent], *Nomura shihon shijo kuotari* [Nomura Capital Market Quarterly], Autumn 2022, <https://www.nicmr.com/nicmr/report/repo/2022/2022aut05.pdf>.

39) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration," March 29, 2012, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/19158/>.

40) Rajan Kumar et al., eds., *Locating BRICS in the Global Order: Perspectives from the Global South* (Routledge, 2023), 94.

41) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum," May 13, 2017, <http://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/>.

42) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "BRICS Joint Statement on Strengthening and Reforming the Multilateral System," June 1, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33888/>.

43) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "XIII BRICS Summit: New Delhi Declaration," September 9, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34236/>.

to by BRICS members should be a UN system which “adapts to the realities of today’s world,” or a multilateralism that is “representative” of the international community. As India positions the United Nations as the sole legitimate multilateral institution and derives its status from its role there, India tries to make BRICS a platform for revitalizing the United Nations.

4. Multi-Alignment at the Regional Level: Betting on ASEAN Centrality and Working with Like-Minded Countries

(1) From Look East to Act East: India-ASEAN Cooperation Transformed under China's Expansion

In the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region, India’s multi-alignment presents a different face. Whereas global-level alignment aims at mitigating U.S. unilateralism and balancing between the U.S. and China, the origin of multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific is the Look East policy, a belated participation in ASEAN-centered multilateral institutions in response to the post-Cold War environment.

This section first traces how India’s engagement with ASEAN evolved from economic diplomacy into a strategy for dealing with China. It then examines the maritime security cooperation to understand how India’s alignment with ASEAN has developed alongside and in complement to cooperation with the United States and its regional allies, while ASEAN centrality has become one of the regional norms.

Look East was originally India’s economic diplomacy, but by the late 2000s, researchers and policy-makers were gradually linking Look East with India-China maritime competition.⁴⁴ In one of the earliest comprehensive studies on India-China geopolitical rivalry, China specialist John W. Garver argued that India and China are geopolitically incompatible and inevitably fall into a security dilemma.⁴⁵ Following Garver, Indian scholars based in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as Mohan Malik and Harsh V. Pant, presented their views that Indian and Chinese interests were

44) Walter C. Ladwig III, “Delhi’s Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, ‘Look East,’ and India’s Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific,” *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (2009).

45) John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2001).

incompatible in India's neighborhood and "extended neighborhood."⁴⁶

The "extended neighborhood" is a geographical concept imagined and constructed to enable India to expand its strategic horizons; it has been used to refer to Central Asia, the ASEAN states, and the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁷ The concept carries the implication that India cannot expect to achieve economic development if it confines itself to South Asia.

In its 2007 *Maritime Military Strategy*, the Indian Navy identified one of its roles as providing the secure environment necessary for economic development, through which India could occupy "its rightful place in the international community" and fulfill its "manifest destiny."⁴⁸ Such discourse of a great power corresponded to debate in India's strategic community about "restoring India's centrality" or pursuing a "neo-Curzonian strategy."⁴⁹ The ultimate goal was to attain great power status, and the means lay in becoming a hub of connectivity and economic activity, and pursuing a leading role in the region. This strategic concept transformed the character of Look East.

From 2004, India sought to advance the development of its northeastern region, located along the China-India border, in tandem with ASEAN connectivity projects. This, however, securitized the development of border infrastructure. After the Qinghai-Tibet Railway connecting Qinghai Province and Tibet opened in 2006, India responded with the construction of border roads in Arunachal Pradesh. China, in turn, began asserting that Arunachal Pradesh was "South Tibet." As both countries' border infrastructure development fell into a security dilemma, India's connectivity projects took on the character of a strategic response to China's Belt and

46) Mohan Malik, "Eyeing the Dragon: India's China Debate," Special Assessment, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (December 2003); Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Foreign Policy and China," *Strategic Analysis* 30, no. 4 (2006).

47) David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009); Priya Chacko, "The Rise of the Indo-Pacific: Understanding Ideational Change and Continuity in India's Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 4 (2014); Tamari Kazutoshi, "Indo no fukusoteki chitsujo ninshiki to taigai senryaku" [India's multilayered conception of order and its external strategy], in Sahashi Ryo, ed., *Reisengo no Higashi Ajia chitsujo* [The post-Cold War East Asian order] (Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 2020).

48) [India] Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (2007), iii.

49) George Nathaniel Curzon served as British Foreign Secretary (1919–1924) and Viceroy of India (1889–1905). He advocated the economic integrity of the Indian Empire. On neo-Curzonianism, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House, 2010), 182–190.

Road Initiative.⁵⁰

Prime Minister Modi, who took office in 2014, declared that he would evolve Look East into Act East, and under the policy banner of Act East, he explicitly advanced multi-alignment in the region.⁵¹ Act East differs from the previous Look East in two respects. First, “capacity-building” was added as a new element alongside “economic partnership” and “connectivity.” Second, the policy embraced a degree of shared norms, emphasizing commitment to ASEAN centrality⁵² and affinity with Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”⁵³ and the U.S. “rebalance.”⁵⁴

Behind the references to “synergy” with the visions on regional order articulated by Japan and the United States lies the fact that India had come to share the value of “freedom and openness.” India had not always interpreted “freedom of navigation” in the same way as the United States. Yet because China applied pressure that appeared to obstruct economic and security cooperation between India and ASEAN member states in the South China Sea, India came to invoke “freedom of navigation” paired with “unimpeded commerce” as a set of norms.⁵⁵ The term “freedom of

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- 50) On border infrastructure development and the security dilemma, see Izuyama Marie, “Minami Ajia ni okeru Chugoku, Indo no kyoso: Boda, renketsusei, seiryokuken” [Border, connectivity, and spheres of influence: India-China competition in South Asia], *Kokusai mondai* [International Affairs], no. 669 (March 2018).
 - 51) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Prime Minister’s Remarks at the 9th East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar,” November 13, 2014, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24238/>. For a detailed discussion on the Act East policy, see Izuyama Marie, “Indo no chiikishugi gaiko ni okeru Chugoku yoin: Akuto Isuto o chushin ni” [Act East: The China factor in India’s diplomacy in the region], in Takenaka Harukata, ed., “*Kyokoku*” *Chugoku to taiji suru Indo Taiheiyo shokoku* [Indo-Pacific Nations facing China aspiring to be a “Great County”] (Tokyo: Chikurashobo, 2022).
 - 52) India’s support for “ASEAN centrality” was first mentioned at the India-ASEAN Summit held in September 2016. “Chairman’s Statement of the 14th ASEAN-India Summit, September 8, 2016, Vientiane, Lao PDR ‘Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community,’” <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Chairmans-Statement-of-the-14th-ASEAN-India-Summit-Final.pdf>.
 - 53) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-India Joint Statement,” November 11, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000202950.pdf>.
 - 54) [U.S.] White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement ‘Shared Effort; Progress for All,’” January 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-statement-shared-effort-progress-all>.
 - 55) Izuyama Marie, “Kokuren kaiyoho joyaku to Indo: ‘Kokokoku no jiyu’ to engankoku no anzen hosho riei no aida” [Between “freedom of navigation” and coastal states’ security: India and UNCLOS], *Anzen hosho senryaku kenkyu* [Security and Strategy] 1, no. 2 (October 2020): 94-95.

navigation” appeared for the first time in the Indian Navy’s *Maritime Security Strategy* released in 2015.⁵⁶

(2) Multiple Strategic Partnerships with ASEAN Member States

India has strategic partnership agreements with five ASEAN member states. In order of the year of signing, these are Indonesia (2005), Vietnam (2007), Malaysia (2010), Singapore (2015), and the Philippines (2025). One notable pattern is that India established strategic partnerships earlier with countries pursuing non-alignment policies (Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia). Partnerships with these countries also imply defense cooperation within Russian-origin equipment systems: India had provided know-how for maintenance and training related to Russian equipment. By contrast, India established partnerships only recently with U.S. allies and quasi-allies (Singapore and the Philippines). It is somewhat surprising that the partnership with Singapore came relatively later, given Singapore’s role as a bridge between India and ASEAN and its initiative in stepping up bilateral naval exercises. This is likely because Singapore itself did not, until recently, attach much importance to having a formal strategic partnership. Defense cooperation with Singapore has served not only as a junction between India and ASEAN but also as a facilitator to incorporate India into U.S.-led multilateral naval cooperation in the region.

By contrast, the strategic partnerships with Vietnam and the Philippines bear closely on the South China Sea issue. China issued clear warnings against the joint development of resources in the South China Sea by India and Vietnam, and against the supply of Indian naval equipment to Vietnam, both of which accelerated after the conclusion of the strategic partnership.⁵⁷ After China’s intimidation, India’s stake in the South China Sea rose. At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meeting held in Phnom Penh in July 2012, External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna expressed support, for the first time, for “freedom of navigation and access to resources” in connection with developments in the South China Sea.⁵⁸ India’s commitment to “freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce” was incorporated into the Japan-

56) [India] Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 5-6.

57) National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2017*, English edition (2017), 50.

58) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “External Affairs Minister’s Intervention on ‘Exchange of views on Regional and International Issues’ at the 19th ARF Ministerial Meeting,” July 12, 2012; the link is currently broken.

India joint statement of 2013.⁵⁹ The U.S.-India joint statement of 2014 went further, advocating “freedom of navigation and overflight, especially in the South China Sea.”⁶⁰

India has also voiced support for the Philippines’ submission of South China Sea arbitration.⁶¹ On the day the arbitral tribunal awarded its decision in July 2016, India’s Ministry of External Affairs issued an unusual statement that it “noted” the award, supporting “freedom of navigation and over flight, and unimpeded commerce,” and stating that “states should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force.”⁶² India’s tacit support for the Philippines with regard to the arbitration propelled a rapid rapprochement between India and the Philippines. In November 2017, the two countries concluded a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the defense industry and logistics, and in 2022 a contract was signed for the transfer of missiles from India to the Philippines.⁶³ The missiles in question are BrahMos missiles, jointly developed and produced by India and Russia. Although the Philippines had been one of the ASEAN countries most distant from India, the South China Sea issue drew the two together, leading into India’s first export of BrahMos.



Indian destroyer armed with BrahMos missiles, berthed at the Port of Manila (August 2025) (AFP / Jiji Press)

59) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement: Strengthening the Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India beyond the 60th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations,” May 29, 2013, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000005381.pdf>.

60) [U.S.] White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement,” September 30, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>.

61) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Statement: Third India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation,” October 14, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25930/>.

62) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Statement on Award of Arbitral Tribunal on South China Sea under Annexure VII of UNCLOS,” July 12, 2016, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/27019/>.

63) Kojiro Tonosaki, “Brahmos in the Philippines and Quad Potential,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, June 21, 2022, <https://ami.csis.org/brahmos-in-the-philippines-and-quad-potential/>; Dinakar Peri, “India Delivers First Batch of BrahMos to Philippines,” *Hindu*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-delivers-first-batch-of-brahmos-to-philippines/article68084161.ece>.

(3) Strengthening Maritime Security Cooperation

There is no doubt that China's offensive in the South China Sea has spurred maritime security cooperation between India and various ASEAN countries, but it is also worth noting that multiple and diverse pre-existing formats of cooperation provided the foundation.

First, the most solid pillar of cooperation has been the bilateral naval exercise with Singapore. The Singaporean and Indian navies conducted their first joint exercise in 1994.⁶⁴ In February 1998 the two countries held another bilateral exercise, and following an exercise off Kochi, India, in March 1999, the exercises were institutionalized as an annual event under the code name SIMBEX. Singapore deployed three or more vessels from the outset, and in 2004 each country deployed four vessels. Indian submarines also participated, and the exercises were planned for anti-submarine warfare.⁶⁵ The regularization of SIMBEX also relates to progress in U.S.-India naval cooperation. The U.S.-India joint exercise had begun earlier, in 1992, but the United States suspended military cooperation following India's 1998 nuclear tests, after which the joint exercise with Singapore was institutionalized prior to that with the U.S. After the U.S.-India joint exercise resumed in 2002 as Malabar, exercises with both Singapore and the United States came to constitute India's two pillars of its operation-oriented exercises. Experience gained through naval exercises with Singapore helped ease India's hesitance to participate in the Pacific Reach (Western Pacific Submarine Rescue Exercise) and Western Pacific Mine Countermeasures Exercise during the 2000s.

The second pillar consists of joint patrols with Indonesia and Thailand, the maritime neighbors with which India shares maritime boundaries (Table 1). The India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) has been conducted biannually since 2002 and held its 44th iteration in July 2025. The patrol runs along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair on India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands to an Indonesian port (Sabang in recent years). The stated purpose is "keeping this vital part of the IOR safe and secure for commercial shipping, international trade and conduct of legitimate maritime activities," but the more local and pressing common interests at stake are the prevention of illegal fishing,

64) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 1994-1995, 16.

65) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 2004-2005, 49.

drug smuggling, maritime terrorism, and piracy.⁶⁶ These are unglamorous efforts, but they have helped build trust between the two navies. The India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol has likewise been conducted biannually since 2005 and held its 40th iteration in November 2025. In December 2023, the first bilateral naval exercise was held alongside the 36th India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol.

Building on these foundations, naval cooperation between India and ASEAN countries was upgraded another notch from 2018 (Table 2). This is presumed to be the result of an Indian initiative, given that India hosted the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit marking the 25th anniversary of India-ASEAN dialogue relations. On January 26, 2018, India invited the leaders of all ASEAN member states as chief guests on Republic Day, an extraordinary gesture of hospitality. At the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit held the previous day, India's strong commitment was affirmed regarding ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful use of the seas and freedom of commerce, peaceful resolution of disputes based on international law, and the strengthening of maritime cooperation.⁶⁷

In November 2018, the first bilateral naval exercise with Indonesia was held in Surabaya.⁶⁸ Subsequently held biennially under the name Samudra Shakti, it reached its fifth iteration in October 2025 in Visakhapatnam, India.⁶⁹ Slightly later, in September 2019, a bilateral naval exercise with Malaysia was launched as Samudra Laksamana, with the third iteration held in Visakhapatnam in February-March 2024.⁷⁰

In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi previewed that India would “start a new tri-lateral exercise with Singapore soon.” This took shape as the Singapore-India-Thailand exercise SITMEX, held in September 2019, with the harbor phase at Port Blair on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the sea phase in the Andaman

66) [India] Ministry of Defence, “39th Edition of India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol,” December 11, 2022, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1882468®=3&lang=2>.

67) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Delhi Declaration of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit to Mark the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations,” January 25, 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29386/>.

68) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 2018–2019, 33.

69) “India-Indonesia Joint Maritime Exercise at Visakhapatnam from Oct 14-17,” *Print*, October 15, 2025, <https://theprint.in/india/india-indonesia-joint-maritime-exercise-at-visakhapatnam-from-oct-14-17/2764459/>.

70) [India] Ministry of Defence, “India-Malaysia Bilateral Maritime Exercise Samudra Laksamana,” March 1, 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2010643®=3&lang=2>.

Sea.⁷¹ In November 2025, the fifth iteration was held at Changi port, with the Singaporean side emphasizing the like-mindedness of the three navies.⁷²

Table 1. Long-Standing India-ASEAN Cooperation at Sea (as of December 2025)

	Overview	Year Started	Most Recent Iteration
India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT)	Coordinated patrol twice a year along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) to an Indonesian port.	2002	July 2025 (44th)
India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT)	Coordinated patrol twice a year along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) to a Thai port.	2005	November 2025 (40th)
Singapore-India Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX)	Held annually, hosted alternately by Singapore and India.	1994	July 2025 (32nd)

Table 2. India-ASEAN Maritime Exercises Inaugurated since 2018 (as of December 2025)

	First Iteration / Host	Subsequent Iterations
India-Indonesia Bilateral Exercise (Samudra Shakti)	November 2018 Indonesia	November 2019 September 2021 May 2023 October 2025
India-Malaysia Bilateral Exercise (Samudra Laksamana)	September 2019 Unknown	February 2024 / India (3rd)
Singapore-India-Thailand Trilateral Exercise (SITMEX)	September 20, 2019 India	November 2020 / Singapore November 2021 / Thailand November 2024 / India November 2025 / Singapore
ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise	May 2–8, 2023 Co-hosted by India and Singapore.	None to date
India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Exercise	September 20–21, 2023 Host country and exercise area not announced.	None to date

Note: Mutual participation in multilateral exercises hosted by India or ASEAN member states is excluded.

Source: Compiled by the author from Ministry of External Affairs, India, *Annual Report*; Ministry of Defence, India, press releases; and Ministry of Defence, Singapore, press releases.

71) [Singapore] Ministry of Defence, “Singapore, India and Thailand Participate in Inaugural Trilateral Maritime Exercise,” September 16, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/16sep19_nr/.

72) [Singapore] Ministry of Defence, “Singapore, India and Thailand Conclude Trilateral Maritime Exercise, Reaffirming Long-Standing Defence Relations,” November 29, 2025, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/29nov25-nr/>.

(4) India as a Like-Minded Partner

Commemorating 10 years of strategic partnership, India and ASEAN upgraded their strategic partnership to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2022.⁷³ The foundation cited is a regional architecture grounded in the UN Charter, the ASEAN Charter, and ASEAN centrality, with no mention whatsoever of a “multipolar world.” The focus falls instead on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and maritime security.

In May 2023, India and Singapore co-hosted the first ASEAN-India maritime exercise in Changi port and the South China Sea. About 1,400 personnel from the navies of all ASEAN member states except Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar participated. The press release from India's Ministry of Defence emphasized that both the Indian destroyer and the frigate participating in the exercise were indigenously designed and manufactured, showcasing the capability of the Indian defense industry.⁷⁴ Some Indian researchers pointed at a message directed at China, referring to reports that Chinese maritime militia were observed in the zone of maritime exercise.⁷⁵ In September 2023, the first India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral exercise was held.⁷⁶ India is skillfully leveraging its cooperation with Singapore and Indonesia and is shifting its cooperation in the region toward one based on “like-mindedness” while continuing to disavow alliances.

In November 2025, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, attending the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) held in Malaysia, stated in his speech that ADMM-Plus was inseparable from India's Act East policy and praised the steady progress ADMM-Plus has made in evolving from a dialogue platform into a framework for defense cooperation.⁷⁷

73) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” November 12, 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?ddl/35876/>.

74) [India] Ministry of Defence, “Sea Phase of ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise: 2023,” May 9, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1922815>.

75) Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India, ASEAN Hold First Maritime Exercises,” *Diplomat*, May 13, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/india-asean-hold-first-maritime-exercises/>.

76) [India] Ministry of Defence, “Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri Participates in the Maiden India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise,” September 22, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1959717>. The press release does not specify the exercise area.

77) “Rajnath Singh Praises ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meet as Linchpin of India's Vision,” *India Today*, November 1, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/rajnath-singh-praises-asean-defence-ministers-meet-as-linchpin-of-india-vision-2811794-2025-11-01>.

ADMM-Plus also provides India with a venue for advancing defense equipment cooperation with various countries. Although U.S.-India relations are strained over tariffs and the question of mediation between India and Pakistan, on October 31, on the sidelines of the meeting, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held talks with U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, and the two signed a ten-year “Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership.”⁷⁸ Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also held bilateral meetings with the defense ministers of New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. With New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, with whom he had also held bilateral meetings at the previous year’s ADMM-Plus, and with Australia, which he visited in October 2025, defense equipment cooperation was the central item on the agenda. India’s pursuit of multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific suggests that defense equipment and the defense industry are emerging as new pillars of the agenda.

Conclusion

India’s multi-alignment at the global level, or its alignments in pursuit of a multipolar world, takes two formats. The first is the building of strategic partnerships. These take many forms, ranging from older partnerships designed to secure strategic autonomy by distancing India from U.S. unilateralism, to more recent partnerships that engage with all sides of the great power competition including U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia rivalries. All of them can be seen as extensions of non-alignment policy in that they balance each bilateral relation with great powers. In the case of partnerships with ASEAN states, those with non-aligned states were concluded earlier. India has labored to balance between the United States and China since around 2017, and after the war in Ukraine, between the United States and Russia, but the very fact of doing so has displeased the United States. The second format is participation in a wide variety of multilateral institutions and forums, some of which appear, at times, to be mutually contradictory. To take the example of BRICS, the forum India has valued most in recent years, it is a platform for reforming global governance that would reflect the “multipolarity” that has already become a reality, by some indicators such as gross domestic

78) Released on Defence Minister Singh’s official page. “Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh & US Secretary of War Meet on the Margins of 12th ADMM-Plus in Kuala Lumpur,” October 31, 2025, <https://www.rajnathsingh.in/press-release/raksha-mantri-rajnath-singh-us-secretary-of-war-meet-on-the-margins-of-12th-admm-plus-in-kuala-lumpur/>.

product (GDP). India's foremost objectives of BRICS cooperation have been reform of the international financial order dominated by the United States and Europe, and reform of the UN Security Council. Indeed, BRICS has, to a degree, functioned as a pressure group for reforming the IMF and the World Bank. Yet India seems to define BRICS as an inner circle of the G20 with the goal to be treated as an equal negotiating partner by the G7. Apart from the upholding of UN legitimacy, India has not been keen to push a security agenda within BRICS, which might potentially divide the South and the West. So it cannot be concluded that India is aiming at building a parallel order that would counter the West-led order. On the contrary, concerned that the geopolitics of U.S.-China rivalry would creep into BRICS, India has repeatedly conveyed since around 2017 that BRICS is "not anti-Western." Despite this, the second Trump administration, viewing China and Russia as adversaries on issues of tariffs and the role of dollars as key currencies, has come to perceive that BRICS will destroy the dollar, and has begun to view India's cooperation with China within BRICS as problematic, and even India's invocation of a "multipolar world."

In the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, India refrains from invoking a "multipolar world," respects ASEAN centrality, and behaves as a like-minded partner. This stems from the imperative of preventing "regional unipolarity," that is, Chinese hegemony in Asia. Because India has built relations with ASEAN taking care of sovereign equality as well as each member's sensitivity and aspiration, multi-alignment in the region centered on maritime security is deepening relatively smoothly. Should U.S. commitment to the region temporarily decline, India's multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific can serve as a valuable asset, whether for sustaining the inherited existing order or for modifying it gradually and moderately. If India could also build a web of multi-alignment in the regional economy and supply chain, it would become an additional driver of pluralization in the region.