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Multipolarity and Multi-Alignment: India's Quest for Autonomy in a Changing World

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SYNOPSIS

Since independence, India's leaders have attempted to secure autonomy for the country by rejecting military alliances and the bloc politics of the Cold War. In the post-Cold War era, similarly, India has attempted to push for a multipolar regional and global order and it has done this largely via its policy of omni-alignment. This strategy will bring some rewards as well as some challenges with the new Trump administration. Indian leaders will have to deal with some key bilateral relationships while simultaneously securing India's interests in its bilateral relationship with the United States.

COMMENTARY

The second Trump administration presents challenges as well as opportunities for several countries and India is no exception. India's leaders are attempting to secure and further various Indian interests, which largely stem from India's push for a multipolar regional and global order. This paper will make three points. The first outlines the historical underpinnings of India's quest for multipolarity. The second looks at the period since 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into office, and the third point relates to India's pursuit of this goal in the context of Trump 2.0.

India's strong antipathy towards military alliances is the result of both its independence struggle as well as its approach to the bloc politics of the Cold War. Indian independence leaders and their supporters fought a bitter and long battle for Indian independence, and much of this struggle was based on reclaiming Indian dignity against the ruthless imperialism and racism of British colonial rule in India. Indian independence in 1947 happened against the background of a developing Cold War between two blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union respectively.

India's first prime minister and external affairs minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, saw this growing binary divide in global politics as detrimental to India and other post-colonial states as it meant surrendering autonomy in foreign affairs to the leader of one of the two blocs. The Cold War was viewed as a new form of imperialism against post-colonial states, and this led to Nehru joining leaders of other post-colonial states in organising the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, with India becoming one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement.

By the 1970s and 1980s, Delhi depended heavily on Moscow for both military equipment and a tacit defence guarantee against a possible US attack on India, but it still viewed military alliances as a limit on its own autonomy. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Indian politics did not fundamentally alter this structural imperative within Indian foreign policy. When it formed a coalition government in the late 1990s, the BJP, despite having less ideological baggage against the United States, continued to seek and expand India's autonomy in global affairs, while improving relations with the United States across several domains, which included closer defence relations.

India's Omni-Alignment Policy

In 2014, the BJP became the first party since the 1980s to win a majority of seats in the Indian general elections and many analysts forecasted a paradigm shift in India's domestic and foreign policies. Some of this forecasted change did happen but India's search for strategic space continued to rest on a rejection of bloc politics and a support for a multipolar Asia and a multipolar global order. A key part of the forecasted change since 2014 has been India's policy of omni-alignment in pursuit of a multipolar regional and global order, with India having a consequential voice in such regional and global orders. The outreach to countries in the Gulf and the wider Middle East is one key example of such omni-alignment, with India adroitly balancing good relations with countries such as Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates at the same time. It has also managed to maintain its historically close relations with Russia while deepening its relationship with the United States in the political, defence, and economic domains.

This omni-alignment policy since 2014 has served India well on three fronts. It furthers ongoing efforts to reform the Indian economy to create growth and jobs; it helps to ensure that China does not succeed in its quest to be the leader of the Global South in its strategic competition against the United States; and lastly, it foils decades-long efforts by Pakistan to isolate India globally on the issue of the Kashmir dispute.

To some extent, this omni-alignment policy had earlier roots within Indian foreign policy, with India steadily engaging East Asia as part of its "Look East Policy" since the 1990s as well as the deepening of the India-US relationship with the signing of the India-US civil nuclear agreement under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The constant is India's drive to engage as many countries as possible, specifically in the pursuit of regional and global multipolarity.



Since independence, India has championed a multipolar world. This strategy brings both rewards and challenges, especially in navigating its relationship with the United States under Trump 2.0.

Image source: Pexels.

Challenges in Dealing with Trump 2.0

There has been a significant amount of commentary on the close personal relationship between Donald Trump and Modi, but there is also broad agreement that India faces significant challenges in dealing with the new Trump administration. There are also potential opportunities for India, specifically regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as India has consistently stressed the need to prevent a gradual shift of Russia towards becoming a junior partner of China aligned against the United States and its allies. India's ability to simultaneously balance its relationship between the United States and Russia during the Biden administration, despite US pressure, now seems to have borne fruit.

However, certain significant challenges lie ahead for India's pursuit of its omni-alignment strategy — that is, its ability to balance its relationship with the United States even as it develops ties with other countries. Maintaining good relations with Iran will be a key challenge for India under Trump 2.0, especially with Trump's apparent zeal to force Tehran to negotiate on the nuclear issue against the backdrop of threats against Iran. Trump has not hesitated to punish third countries for their relationships with countries he wants to pressure into specific deals on his terms, and India's historically close relationship with Iran could possibly be affected by such moves. The most immediate issue for India will be the impact that proposed US financial sanctions on Iran will have on the Indian-run port of Chabahar, located in southeastern Iran. This challenge is not new as India faced similar challenges vis-à-vis Iran in the first Trump administration, but this time there is a sense that Trump is willing to take a stronger position with Iran, with possible dire consequences for India. India will continue its omni-alignment strategy, and engaging with Iran will continue to be part of this strategy, even as it builds on its relationships with the Gulf Arab countries, Israel, as well as the United States. The Indian quest for a multipolar regional and global order will face significant challenges under Trump 2.0 and it remains to be seen how it will deal with these pressures.

India's quest for autonomy has a long history stretching back to its early independence period as well as its negotiation of the bloc politics of the Cold War. Despite a radically transformed international order with the end of the Cold War, India's strategy to achieve this goal remains largely the same — it continues to pursue multi-alignment strategies with various countries while trying to help construct a multipolar regional and global order. The second Trump administration, while affording India some

advantages from this multi-alignment strategy, poses significant challenges for India. One of these key challenges will be managing relations with Iran, which has historically been a key part of India's quest for multipolarity both regionally and globally.

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