



# India's Strategic Opportunism in a Fractured World

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## **India's Strategic Opportunism in a Fractured World**

*By Duvvuri Subbarao*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As global politics shifts from multipolarity to fragmentation, India's long-standing doctrine of strategic opportunism faces new pressures. Historically adept at balancing competing powers – from its treaty with the Soviet Union to its nuanced stance on Afghanistan – India today navigates complex ties with both the United States and Russia. Yet rising expectations from Washington, coupled with India's cautious response to crises such as the ongoing Iran strikes, expose the limits of perpetual hedging. While opportunism has served India well, it must evolve into structured coalition-building to retain influence in an increasingly bloc-driven world.*

### **COMMENTARY**

When Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney warned in [Davos](#) that middle powers must organise or risk irrelevance, many in India would have heard the argument with quiet detachment. For decades, New Delhi has resisted being slotted into neat geopolitical categories; as an ally, a bloc member, or a camp follower. It is none of these. India's foreign policy tradition is something far less tidy: strategic opportunism.

Historically, that instinct has served it well.

### **Lessons from the Cold War: Opportunism as Strategy**

Consider the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. Signed at the height of Cold War rivalry, it was not an ideological embrace of Moscow but a calculated hedge. Faced with a US-China-Pakistan alignment during the Bangladesh crisis, India sought Soviet backing as strategic insurance. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union crumbled, New Delhi pivoted with remarkable

agility, liberalising its economy and expanding engagement with the United States and Europe.

The same pragmatism was visible during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. Despite its treaty ties, India neither fully endorsed nor openly condemned Moscow's actions. Instead, it emphasised diplomacy and regional stability, avoiding entanglement in a costly proxy conflict. It was calibrated ambiguity – evidence that principle and prudence could be balanced when national interest was the compass.

### **Continuity in a New Era**

Fast forward to today, and the pattern persists.

India deepens defence cooperation and technology partnerships with the United States while continuing to procure arms from Russia. It expands trade talks with Washington even as it purchases discounted Russian oil. Rather than choosing sides, it compartmentalises relationships. Critics call this inconsistency. In reality, it reflects a deeply embedded doctrine: avoid binary choices in a multipolar world.

### **The Iran Moment: Opportunism Under Scrutiny**

That strategy is visible again in the current Middle East crisis. India finds itself maintaining an awkward silence after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran, triggering regional tensions and sharp global reactions. On one hand, New Delhi is acutely aware that its economic and strategic future is increasingly tied to staying on the right side of Washington – for trade access, technology partnerships, and Indo-Pacific security cooperation. On the other, its reluctance to explicitly condemn the attack on Iran risks reinforcing a perception that India is overly calculating and hesitant to take principled positions.

### **From Multipolarity to Fragmentation**

The question then is: will India's strategic opportunism work in a world that is no longer merely multipolar, but fractured?

Trade has become strategic. Technology is securitised. Energy flows are politicised. The United States, seeking to constrain Moscow after the Ukraine war, has repeatedly expressed discomfort with India's continued purchase of Russian crude. At the same time, Washington and New Delhi are negotiating expanded trade frameworks focused on supply-chain resilience, digital commerce, and advanced manufacturing. The subtext is clear: deeper economic integration ideally implies closer strategic alignment.

India has resisted that logic. It frames its oil imports as economic necessity, not geopolitical messaging. Discounted energy has cushioned inflation and supported economic stability. Abandoning it under pressure would contradict India's insistence that national interest – not bloc politics – guides policy.

### **The Limits of Perpetual Hedging**

Yet this is where the debate sharpens.

India may struggle to participate meaningfully in middle-power coalitions of the type that Carney called for because its foreign-policy mindset remains anchored in an older conception of strategic autonomy. A doctrine that once enabled flexibility may now constrain influence in a world where power is increasingly exercised through organised blocs.

India's instinct is to preserve flexibility and avoid binding commitments. But the costs of perpetual hedging are rising. Economic ecosystems are becoming bloc-based. Technology partnerships are tied to security frameworks. Financial systems are increasingly weaponised. Opportunism without institutional backing risks diminishing returns.

### **The US Factor: Trade, Technology, and Pressure**

The ongoing India-US trade negotiations illustrate this tension. Washington views India as central to supply-chain diversification and Indo-Pacific strategy. India sees economic opportunity and technological advancement. Yet American policymakers increasingly link economic cooperation to broader strategic coherence, including unease over India's ties with Russia.

New Delhi resists such linkage. It argues that partnerships should stand on their own merits. This compartmentalisation has worked so far – but it is becoming harder to sustain as economic and strategic domains converge.

### **A Structural Shift in the Global Order**

The deeper issue is structural. During the Cold War, India operated in a stable bipolar system where hedging was manageable. Today's fractured order is more volatile and arguably multipolar. Supply chains shift quickly. Export controls can limit access overnight. Sanctions regimes are expanding. The cost of balancing multiple relationships is rising.

This is where Carney's argument becomes relevant. Middle powers that rely solely on flexibility risk being squeezed by organised blocs. Coalition-building is not about surrendering autonomy; it is about amplifying leverage.

### **Adapting Without Overcorrecting**

India's hesitation is rooted in history. It has long been wary of alliances that constrain autonomy. Strategic autonomy is not just policy – it is institutional memory.

But adaptation is now essential.

India need not abandon opportunism; it must refine it. This means selective coalition-building without rigid alignment. Issue-based partnerships – in the Indo-Pacific, in

digital infrastructure, in critical supply chains – can enhance India's influence while preserving independence.

### **The Domestic Foundation of Strategic Power**

At the same time, domestic strength remains critical. Energy security, manufacturing capability, financial depth, and technological innovation will determine India's ability to resist external pressure. Without internal resilience, external strategy becomes reactive.

### **Conclusion: From Opportunism to Leadership**

The risk lies not in cooperation but in inertia. If India clings to transactional opportunism while others build structured coalitions, it will lose space for manoeuvre. Yet joining blocs uncritically would undermine its long-term ambitions.

India's foreign policy has never been about choosing sides; it has been about choosing timing.

But the world now demands more than timing – it demands organisation.

Whether India can evolve from opportunistic hedger to coalition shaper will define its future. Strategic autonomy must become strategic influence.

The question is no longer whether India can remain opportunistic. It is whether it can transform opportunism into leadership in a world increasingly fractured by aggressive nationalism.

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