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Tactical Balancing: India's Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Multipolar Equilibrium (2015–2026)

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India's foreign policy over the past decade demonstrates a distinctive form of balance-of-power diplomacy shaped by strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and issue-based partnerships. Rather than committing itself to a fixed alliance structure, India has simultaneously engaged with the United States-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), maintained significant defence and energy relations with Russia, pursued calibrated de-escalation with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and strengthened its leadership role in the Global South through platforms such as the G20 and BRICS. This paper examines these overlapping engagements through the lens of what it terms 'tactical balancing': a trigger-driven, issue-specific, and reversible recalibration of India's hedging, soft-balancing, and zone-balancing behaviour, distinguished analytically from the broader and more enduring orientation of strategic autonomy. Using a qualitative, triangulated case-study methodology across four issue areas the Quad and Indo-Pacific, the Russia relationship, the China border track, and institutional balancing and drawing on government statements, English-language policy journalism, and peer-reviewed international-relations scholarship, the paper develops explicit criteria for identifying tactical balancing empirically and applies them to Indian conduct between 2015 and 2026. It argues that India's multi-alignment enables New Delhi to hedge across competing centres of power while preserving strategic flexibility, safeguarding economic and security interests, and expanding its diplomatic influence, but that this comes at the cost of recurring ambiguity and periodic exposure to great-power coercion. The study concludes that India's contemporary diplomacy represents an adaptive and pragmatic evolution of balance-of-power politics, though whether it constitutes a genuine pursuit of

multipolar equilibrium or primarily a legitimating discourse for national-interest maximisation remains, on the evidence surveyed, an open question.

Keywords: *tactical balancing, zone balancing, diplomacy, international relations, national interest and security.*

INTRODUCTION

The idea of balance of power is one of the oldest concepts in the study of international relations, classically describing the tendency of states to align, rearm, or manoeuvre so that no single power dominates the international system unchallenged. In the twenty-first century, this behaviour rarely takes the form of formal military alliances of the Cold War kind. Instead, major and middle powers increasingly practise what scholars call ‘soft balancing’ or ‘zone balancing’¹ – using diplomacy, economic partnerships, and selective institutional engagement to offset the influence of a stronger or more assertive power without provoking open confrontation.

India offers one of the clearest contemporary illustrations of this pattern. Since around 2014, and especially after the 2020 military clash with China in the Galwan Valley, Indian foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has been built around the twin pillars of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment.² As Jaishankar has repeatedly told MEA-affiliated forums and international audiences, India has ‘a stable relationship with the US,’ values the Quad as a platform for regional cooperation, and simultaneously treats a multipolar world as inherently advantageous to Indian interests.³ This paper analyses how this balancing behaviour has actually operated in practice across four fronts: the Indo-Pacific and the Quad; the India–Russia energy and defence relationship; the India–China border relationship; and India’s institutional leadership within the G20, BRICS, and the Global South.

¹ Robert A Pape, ‘Soft Balancing against the United States’ (2005) 30(1) *International Security* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137457>> accessed 13 August 2026; T V Paul, *RESTRAINING GREAT POWERS: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era* (1st edn, Yale University Press 2018)

² Ian Hall, ‘Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi’ (2016) 105(3) *The Round Table* <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2016.1180760>> accessed 13 August 2026

³ Md Zakariya Khan, ‘Multipolar World benefits India, strengthens global ties: EAM Jaishankar’ *Business Standard* (07 March 2025) <https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/india-multipolar-world-jaishankar-us-foreign-policy-trade-china-kashmir-125030700709_1.html> accessed 13 August 2026

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodology, including source selection, periodisation, and case-selection logic. Section 3 defines ‘tactical balancing’ and situates it analytically against strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, hedging, soft balancing, and zone balancing. Section 4 traces the shift from Nehruvian non-alignment to contemporary multi-alignment. Sections 5 and 6 examine India’s China-facing balancing externally, through the Quad and Indo-Pacific partnerships, and directly, through border de-escalation. Section 7 analyses the Russia relationship as a case of economic and strategic hedging. Section 8 discusses India’s institutional balancing through the G20 presidency and BRICS. Section 9 looks at regional balancing in South Asia. Section 10 presents a comparative analytical summary of the four dimensions. Section 11 discusses criticisms and the underlying counterargument about India’s motives, and Section 12 concludes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a qualitative, single-case, multi-issue-area design, treating India’s foreign policy between 2015 and 2026 as one case examined across four analytically distinct but interacting sub-cases: Quad/Indo-Pacific engagement, the Russia relationship, the China border track, and institutional balancing through the G20 and BRICS. The period 2015–2026 was chosen because it captures the consolidation of the multi-alignment doctrine after 2014, the 2020 Galwan crisis and its aftermath, the Russia–Ukraine war from 2022, India’s G20 presidency of 2022–2023, and developments up to India’s 2026 BRICS chairmanship, providing sufficient temporal range to observe both continuity and change in balancing behaviour.

Evidence comes from three tiers of sources, triangulated against one another rather than relied on individually. The first tier consists of primary government material: statements and transcripts from the Ministry of External Affairs, the Press Information Bureau, and Newsonair/All India Radio, which record India’s own official framing of its conduct. The second tier consists of English-language print and policy journalism, principally *The Hindu*, the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, *Deccan Herald*, *Reuters*, and the *BBC*, selected because they provide the most consistent contemporaneous English-language coverage of the four issue-areas and because EPW in particular publishes scholarly commentary that engages critically with government framing. The third tier consists of peer-reviewed international-relations

scholarship⁴, used to supply the theoretical vocabulary against which Indian conduct is assessed and to check government and media framing against independent academic analysis. Within each issue-area, an event or statement is treated as significant for this paper's argument only where it is corroborated across at least two of these three tiers; single-source claims, particularly from government statements alone, are flagged as such rather than presented as settled fact.

This approach has identifiable limits, which the paper acknowledges rather than obscures. It relies on public-domain material and cannot access internal deliberations, so claims about Indian motives are necessarily inferences from stated positions and observed outcomes rather than direct evidence of intent. Coverage is limited to English-language sources, which may under-represent domestic Hindi-language or regional-language debate about foreign policy. Finally, because government statements and mainstream policy journalism are themselves interested actors in the narrative they report, the paper treats them as data about how balancing is publicly justified and contested, not as neutral arbiters of whether a given policy 'really' constitutes balancing – that determination is made using the criteria set out in Section 3.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING TACTICAL BALANCING

Balance-of-power theory, in its classical realist form, holds that states respond to a concentration of power in a rival by either 'internal balancing' (building up their own military and economic capability) or 'external balancing' (forming coalitions with other states). India's post-2014 conduct fits awkwardly into either category alone, and the existing literature offers several adjacent but distinct concepts for describing it. Before applying any of them to India, it is necessary to define these concepts precisely and to specify how this paper's own term, 'tactical balancing,' relates to and differs from them.

Strategic autonomy is the broadest of these terms: a general normative and doctrinal commitment to preserving freedom of decision-making and avoiding binding commitments to

⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China' (2008) 30(2) *Contemporary Southeast Asia* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>> accessed 13 August 2026; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective' (2021) 3(2) *China International Strategy Review* <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>> accessed 13 August 2026; Frank O'Donnell and Mario Papa, 'India's multi-alignment management and the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle' (2021) 97(3) *International Affairs* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia036>> accessed 13 August 2026; Mario Papa and Zhen Han, 'The evolution of soft balancing in informal institutions: the case of BRICS' (2025) 101(1) *International Affairs* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae278>> accessed 13 August 2026

any single power or bloc. It describes an orientation, not a specific action. Multi-alignment, as developed by Hall, is the structural expression of that orientation: the simultaneous cultivation of strategic partnerships with multiple, competing centres of power, built on three constitutive elements – membership in a wide array of multilateral and minilateral forums, bilateral strategic partnerships across the ideological spectrum, and ‘normative hedging,’ meaning a refusal to commit unconditionally to any single power’s preferred normative order. Hedging, in the sense developed by Kuik for smaller and middle states, is narrower still: it is insurance-seeking behaviour under conditions of high uncertainty and high stakes, in which a state deliberately pursues opposite or seemingly contradictory measures toward competing powers to avoid taking a side and to preserve a fall-back position. Soft balancing refers specifically to the use of non-military instruments – international institutions, economic statecraft, and normative constraint – to restrain a dominant or threatening power. Zone balancing is narrower again: a strategy in which a threatened state strengthens the resilience of third states in a contested region against a common coercive power, rather than forming a direct counter-alliance.

These concepts describe overlapping but distinguishable phenomena: strategic autonomy is the doctrine; multi-alignment is the structure through which it is pursued; hedging, soft balancing, and zone balancing are specific behavioural mechanisms within that structure. The gap this paper identifies is that Indian conduct frequently involves the deliberate, short-to-medium-term recalibration of the mix and intensity of these mechanisms in response to a specific event or opportunity – a phenomenon that existing terms capture only partially. This paper labels that recalibration ‘tactical balancing’ and proposes five criteria for identifying it empirically, so that it can be distinguished from ordinary strategic autonomy or from foreign policy that is simply pragmatic rather than balancing-oriented:

Identifiable Trigger: the policy adjustment follows a specific, dateable event, crisis, or opportunity (for example, the Galwan clash, the Russia–Ukraine invasion, or the G20 presidency), rather than reflecting an unprompted, gradual doctrinal shift.

Issue-Specificity: the adjustment operates within a bounded policy domain (energy imports, border patrolling protocols, a specific multilateral forum) rather than altering India’s overall alignment posture.

Simultaneity: countervailing relationships are pursued at the same time, not sequentially; for example, deepening Quad cooperation while simultaneously de-escalating with China, rather than choosing one after abandoning the other.

Reversibility and Non-Binding Character: the adjustment creates no formal treaty obligation and can be recalibrated again without requiring exit from an alliance, distinguishing it from classical external balancing.

Articulated or Inferable Strategic Rationale: the adjustment is defensible, in official statements or in its observable pattern, as serving a broader multipolar or autonomy-preserving objective, rather than being explainable only as ad hoc opportunism or short-term domestic political convenience.

On this basis, a policy episode is treated in this paper as an instance of tactical balancing only where it satisfies all five criteria; where it satisfies some but not others, it is described instead as an instance of ordinary strategic autonomy, routine hedging, or simply pragmatic policy-making, and the distinction is made explicit in the relevant section. This operationalisation does not claim to resolve every borderline case in particular; criterion five requires an inference about rationale that can be contested, but it provides a replicable standard against which the empirical material in Sections 5 to 9 is assessed, addressing the concern that 'tactical balancing' as a label could otherwise be applied to almost any adaptive foreign policy behaviour.

A second theoretical strand relevant to this framework is institutional balancing and institutional hedging, recently elaborated by Papa and Han and by Kuik and Ahmad⁵ in relation to BRICS. This literature distinguishes states that use an institution to constrain a rival power's agenda (institutional balancing) from states that use an institution simultaneously to extract benefits from, and limit commitments to, more than one great-power bloc (institutional hedging). This distinction is applied directly to India's G20 and BRICS conduct in Section 8.

⁵ Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Abdul Razak Ahmad, 'The Geopolitics of BRICS: Between (and beyond) Institutional Balancing and Institutional Hedging' in Heiwai Tang and Brian Wong Yue Shun (eds), *Towards a Future for BRICS+* (Hong Kong University Press 2025)

FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO MULTI-ALIGNMENT: THE TACTICAL SHIFT

India's balancing tradition did not emerge in 2014; it is rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which Jawaharlal Nehru helped found at the 1955 Bandung Conference and which was formally institutionalised at the first NAM summit in Belgrade in 1961. NAM offered newly decolonised states a collective diplomatic voice, but after the end of the Cold War removed the East–West balance that had made non-alignment strategically valuable, the doctrine increasingly left India on the margins of great-power decision-making rather than at its centre.

What has changed under the current government is less the underlying instinct to avoid binding alliances than the tactical sophistication with which that instinct is executed. Hall's peer-reviewed analysis of this shift argues that multi-alignment is a compromise strategy uniting factions within India's foreign-policy elite that hold different views on the value of closer ties with Washington and on Chinese intentions, and cautions that the strategy may not be sustainable indefinitely in a dynamic regional order. Consistent with this, analysts have described the shift in more journalistic terms as a doctrine that allows India to 'talk to everybody while tilting to nobody',⁶ pulling India toward the centre of great-power diplomacy on issues from Ukraine to Israel–Gaza and giving it an outsized role at forums from BRICS to the G20. The doctrine is deliberate rather than passive: it is an active attempt to extract technological, economic, and security benefits from every major power simultaneously, rather than fence-sitting.

This tactical evolution is visible in India's own institutional self-description. Speaking to G7 foreign ministers and at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026, Jaishankar underlined that the world is moving toward greater multipolarity, with an increasing number of independent, autonomous centres of decision-making, and stressed the need for a 'nimble and dynamic' foreign policy.⁷ Earlier, in March 2025, Jaishankar had argued that even a shift in United States foreign policy under the Trump administration toward a more multipolar orientation was, on balance, advantageous for India, since it created space for New Delhi to

⁶ Karan Bir Singh Sidhu, 'Realignment of India's Foreign Policy: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment' *The KBS Chronicle* (22 July 2025) <<https://kbssidhu.substack.com/p/realignment-of-indias-foreign-policy>> accessed 13 August 2026

⁷ 'EAM Jaishankar Stresses Dynamic Foreign Policy At Munich Security Conference 2026' *Akashvani News* (14 February 2026) <<https://newsonair.gov.in/eam-jaishankar-stresses-dynamic-foreign-policy-at-munich-security-conference-2026/>> accessed 13 August 2026

pursue its own interests without being locked into a single bloc's expectations.

BALANCING CHINA EXTERNALLY: THE QUAD, THE INDO-PACIFIC, AND ZONE BALANCING

The most visible external-balancing mechanism in India's contemporary foreign policy is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The Quad's revival after 2017 and its reinvigoration following the 2020 Galwan clash reflect what Tarapore terms 'zone balancing': rather than forming a direct military counter-alliance against China, India works with partners to strengthen the resilience of states across the wider Indo-Pacific against Chinese coercion, constraining Beijing's options without triggering the confrontation a formal alliance would invite.

Reporting on the July 2026 Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Manila illustrates how India continues to calibrate this balancing act. Even as New Delhi cautiously normalised relations with Beijing, it simultaneously deepened cooperation within the Quad, reaffirming the grouping's shared commitment to a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The Quad has been reported to serve purposes beyond simply offsetting China: it raises India's profile as a leading Indo-Pacific power, deepens defence and technology partnerships with advanced economies, and provides flexibility in responding to regional contingencies, while New Delhi continues to resist portraying the Quad as a military alliance directed against Beijing.⁸

This pattern is not new. Reporting from 2018 on a Quad-level diplomatic consultation in Bangkok noted that India declined to join its Quad partners in language emphasising 'international law and freedom of navigation', phrasing often read as an implicit criticism of Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea, signalling continued caution about openly antagonising Beijing even while participating alongside Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra.⁹ The persistence of this pattern across nearly a decade satisfies this paper's simultaneity and reversibility criteria for tactical balancing: India sustains Quad engagement and border de-

⁸ 'India Balances China Reset with Quad Commitment in a Changing Indo-Pacific' *The Indian Eye* (26 July 2026) <<https://theindianeye.com/2026/07/26/india-balances-china-reset-with-quad-commitment-in-a-changing-indo-pacific/>> accessed 13 August 2026

⁹ Anirban Bhaumik, 'India does a balancing act between 'Quad' and China' *Deccan Herald* (02 June 2019) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-does-a-balancing-act-between-quad-and-china-737581.html>> accessed 13 August 2026

escalation with China at the same time, and neither track forecloses the other.

India has supplemented the Quad with a wider web of Indo-Pacific partnerships including deeper defence and technology cooperation with France, Japan, Australia, and increasingly the United Kingdom and Germany that could allow India to reduce over-dependence on any single power, including both Russia and the United States, while shoring up its strategic autonomy in a period of intensifying great-power rivalry.¹⁰

MANAGING THE NORTHERN BORDER: TACTICAL DE-ESCALATION WITH CHINA

Alongside external balancing through the Quad, India has pursued a parallel and at times contradictory track of direct de-escalation with China along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC). The April–May 2020 military stand-off in eastern Ladakh, which culminated in the deadly Galwan Valley clash, froze the bilateral relationship and pushed India toward closer security cooperation with Quad partners. Over the following four years, both sides pursued incremental disengagement at friction points such as Patrol Point 15, and in October 2024 Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping held their first formal bilateral meeting in five years on the sidelines of the sixteenth BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, where they endorsed an agreement on patrolling and disengagement in eastern Ladakh.¹¹

According to Indian Foreign Secretary briefings covered by Deccan Herald, the two leaders agreed that the Special Representatives mechanism on the boundary question, which has existed since 2003, would resume talks to oversee the management of peace and tranquillity in border areas and explore a resolution to the underlying dispute. Both militaries subsequently completed disengagement at the two remaining friction points, Depsang and Demchok, and agreed to communicate in advance before conducting patrols in sensitive zones, a step reported as paving the way for a resumption of normal border patrolling.¹²

¹⁰ Swagato Ganguly, *Strategy for India in a New Era: Working in Concert with the Middle Powers* (ISAS Brief No 1045, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 2023)

¹¹ 'China says disengagement of troops going on 'smoothly' in eastern Ladakh' *Deccan Herald* (26 October 2024) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/world/china-india-disengagement-3250036>> accessed 13 August 2026

¹² 'India–China Border Disengagement Complete; Patrolling to Resume As Per Agreement' *Akashvani News* (07 February 2025) <<https://newsonair.gov.in/india-china-border-disengagement-complete-patrolling-to-resume-as-per-agreement/>> accessed 13 August 2026

This border diplomacy satisfies the paper's criteria for tactical, rather than ideological or doctrinal, balancing: India has not allowed its deepening security cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia to foreclose direct engagement with Beijing, nor has it allowed the prospect of normalised ties with China to slow its parallel investment in Quad-based external balancing. In August 2025, Jaishankar told visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi that combating terrorism remained a major priority for India, while also reiterating that India seeks a 'fair, balanced, and multipolar world order' – language that situates the bilateral relationship within India's broader multipolar framing rather than treating it as subordinate to the US partnership.¹³

THE RUSSIA FACTOR: ENERGY DIPLOMACY AS STRATEGIC HEDGE

Perhaps the clearest test of India's balancing doctrine has come from the Russia–Ukraine war. Since February 2022, India has consistently declined to condemn Russia's invasion at the United Nations Security Council, General Assembly, or Human Rights Council, instead calling for an immediate end to hostilities and a return to dialogue – a posture analysts have termed 'studied neutrality'.¹⁴ Simultaneously, India dramatically increased its imports of discounted Russian crude oil. According to figures reported by the Council on Foreign Relations, Russian crude accounted for under one per cent of India's oil imports before the invasion; industry data cited by IMPRI show that Russia's share rose to roughly 35–39 percent by 2024–25, transforming Russia from a marginal supplier into India's single largest source of crude oil and displacing traditional partners such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.¹⁵

New Delhi has defended this shift on the grounds of energy security for a price-sensitive economy of over 1.4 billion people, noting that India imports more than 85 per cent of its total oil requirement and that national interest, not external political pressure, guides its import

¹³ 'EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar Tells His Chinese Counterpart That Fight against Terrorism In All Forms Is Major Priority For India' *Akashvani News* (19 August 2025) <<https://newsonair.gov.in/eam-jaishankar-chinese-fm-wang-yi-hold-talks-stresses-fight-against-terror-calls-for-three-mutuals-in-ties/>> accessed 13 August 2026

¹⁴ Raymond E Vickery Jr and Tom Cutler, 'Oil for India' (*The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 03 September 2024) <<https://www.nbr.org/publication/oil-for-india/>> accessed 13 August 2026

¹⁵ Ashwini K Swain, 'Oil Energy, India–U.S. Relations, and the Russia Conundrum' (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 February 2026) <<https://www.cfr.org/articles/oil-energy-india-u-s-relations-and-the-russia-conundrum>> accessed 13 August 2026; Asmatwali, 'India's Russian Oil Imports and the Sanctions Squeeze: Balancing Strategic Autonomy and Economic Cost' (*Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI)*, 21 June 2026) <<https://www.impriindia.com/centres/center-for-international-relations-and-strategic-studies/indias-russian-oil-imports-and-the-sanctions-squeeze-balancing-strategic-autonomy-and-economic-cost/>> accessed 13 August 2026

decisions.¹⁶ Notably, the MEA has pointed out that in 2022 the United States itself had encouraged India to continue purchasing discounted Russian oil to help stabilise global energy markets after Western sanctions – a fact India has used to rebut later criticism of the same behaviour. This episode illustrates the tactical, situational character of Indian balancing: Washington’s own stance shifted sharply between the Biden administration, which tolerated and even encouraged the practice, and the Trump administration, which in 2025 imposed additional tariffs of up to 50 percent on Indian goods in response to continued Russian oil purchases.

India’s envoy to Russia has publicly defended this posture by noting that the United States has not imposed comparable secondary tariffs on China, the largest importer of Russian oil, or on the European Union, which continues substantial trade with Moscow, arguing that India was maintaining strategic autonomy in its energy decision-making rather than submitting to selective external pressure.¹⁷ At the same time, India has kept its relationship with Ukraine intact, with Modi visiting Kyiv in 2024, underscoring that the Russia relationship is managed as one node within a wider balancing strategy rather than an exclusive alignment. O’Donnell and Papa’s peer-reviewed analysis of India’s management of the Russia–India–China triangle similarly finds that New Delhi treats each bilateral relationship as instrumentally separable, resisting the consolidation of RIC into a coherent bloc that would constrain its own room for manoeuvre.

Underlying this energy relationship is a deeper strategic calculation about the India–Russia–China triangle. A dossier by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, reported by Deccan Herald, observed that India and Russia share certain geopolitical assumptions, including support for a less US-dominated, multipolar global order, but cautioned that excessive Indian reliance on Russian arms could constrain India’s strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China, since continued access to Russian weaponry may be viewed in New Delhi as important in a future confrontation with Beijing.¹⁸ This underlines the layered logic of India’s Russia policy: it is simultaneously an economic hedge against oil-price volatility, a defence-relationship hedge

¹⁶ Nidhi Verma, ‘Why India’s Russian oil imports sparked US tariffs amid Ukraine peace talks’ *Reuters* (27 August 2025) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/why-indias-russian-oil-imports-sparked-us-tariffs-amid-ukraine-peace-talks-2025-08-27/>> accessed 13 August 2026

¹⁷ Cherylann Mollan, ‘India will buy oil from where it gets ‘the best deal’ – envoy to Russia’ *BBC News* (25 August 2025) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jnye657100>> accessed 13 August 2026

¹⁸ ‘India’s position on Ukraine war a calculated strategic interest: Singapore-based think tank’ *Deccan Herald* (02 June 2023) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/indias-position-on-ukraine-war-a-calculated-strategic-interest-singapore-based-think-tank-1224289.html>> accessed 13 August 2026

against overreliance on Western suppliers, and, more subtly, an instrument for keeping Moscow from drifting entirely into Beijing's orbit.

INSTITUTIONAL BALANCING: THE G20 PRESIDENCY, BRICS, AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Beyond bilateral and minilateral balancing, India has increasingly used multilateral institutions themselves as balancing instruments – reshaping the composition and agenda of global forums rather than merely participating in them. India's G20 presidency, which ran from December 2022 to September 2023, is the clearest example. During this period, India convened the first-ever 'Voice of Global South Summit' in January 2023, bringing together roughly 125 developing countries to articulate priorities that the G20's traditional membership had often overlooked, and channelled those inputs into the formal G20 agenda.¹⁹

The centrepiece achievement of India's presidency was securing the African Union's admission as a permanent member of the G20 at the New Delhi summit in September 2023, a step that expanded the forum to represent roughly eighty per cent of the global population and was widely described as bridging the North–South divide within global economic governance.²⁰ Research published through RIS notes that the G20 under India's chairmanship also launched initiatives such as the Global Biofuels Alliance and committed to halving the digital gender gap by 2030, reflecting an agenda deliberately tilted toward developing-country priorities rather than purely great-power concerns.²¹

This institutional balancing extends to BRICS, where India has supported the grouping's expansion while resisting attempts, particularly by Russia and China, to turn it into an explicitly anti-Western bloc. Applying the distinction proposed by Papa and Han and by Kuik and Ahmad between institutional balancing (using a forum to constrain a rival's agenda) and institutional hedging (using a forum to extract benefits from, and limit commitment to, competing blocs simultaneously), India's BRICS conduct reads more clearly as institutional hedging than

¹⁹ *1st Voice of Global South Summit* (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023)

²⁰ 'Towards a Brighter Tomorrow: India's G20 Presidency and the Dawn of a New Multilateralism' *Prime Minister's Office* (30 November 2023) <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/towards-a-brighter-tomorrow-indias-g20-presidency-and-the-dawn-of-a-new-multilateralism/> accessed 13 August 2026

²¹ 'India's G20 Presidency as a Voice of Global South' RIS Discussion Paper Series Discussion Paper No 291, 2024 <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/DP_291_Sushil_Kumar.pdf> accessed 13 August 2026

institutional balancing: India has not sought to turn BRICS into an anti-Western vehicle, but neither has it allowed the forum to be captured entirely by a Russia–China agenda. An EPW commentary on the May 2026 BRICS Foreign Ministers’ meeting in New Delhi – held under India’s chairmanship – noted that the summit concluded without a joint statement because of unresolved tensions between Iran and the United Arab Emirates over the conflict involving the United States and Israel, and observed that India, as chair, issued an Outcome Document recording differing national positions rather than forcing a false consensus.²² The same commentary argued that India’s own tilt toward the US–Israel–UAE axis on certain issues sits uneasily with its declared commitment to multipolarity, Global South leadership, and strategic autonomy – a critique addressed further in Section 11.

Taken together, India’s conduct within the G20 and BRICS illustrates a form of balancing that operates at the level of institutional architecture rather than military alignment: by simultaneously chairing forums associated with the Western-anchored order (G20, and previously the G7 as an invitee since 2019) and forums associated with a more explicitly multipolar or non-Western orientation (BRICS, SCO), India positions itself as an indispensable bridge rather than a committed member of either camp.

REGIONAL BALANCING: NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST AND CONNECTIVITY DIPLOMACY

India’s balancing strategy is not confined to great-power relations; it also operates regionally through the ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy and complementary connectivity initiatives designed to offset growing Chinese economic and infrastructural influence in South Asia. India has increased development assistance, infrastructure financing, and defence cooperation with neighbours such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives, partly as a counterweight to Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investment in the same countries. Continued engagement with Iran’s Chabahar port project, participation in BIMSTEC as an alternative to the largely dormant SAARC, and promotion of connectivity corridors such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which Jaishankar highlighted at the Munich Security

²² Anuradha M Chenoy, ‘BRICS Foreign Ministers Meet: Strategic Mirroring of West Asian Ruptures’ *EPW Engage* (21 May 2026) <<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/brics-foreign-ministers-meet-strategic-mirroring>> accessed 13 August 2026

Conference in February 2026 as central to connectivity, logistics, and trade linking India with Europe via the Gulf, are all consistent with this pattern.²³

This regional dimension matters for the broader argument because it shows that Indian hedging is not simply reactive to superpower rivalry but is also proactive at the sub-regional level, where India seeks to remain the primary security and economic partner for its immediate neighbours even as those countries simultaneously deepen ties with China. The MEA has consistently framed this as part of India's vision of being a 'first responder' and preferred partner in its immediate neighbourhood and the wider Indian Ocean region.

COMPARATIVE ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

The four issue-areas examined above are summarised in Table 1 below against a common set of analytical categories: objective, primary instrument, key partners, balancing target, and strategic outcome to make the comparative logic of India's tactical balancing explicit rather than leaving it implicit across separate narrative sections.

Table 1. India's tactical balancing across four issue-areas, 2015–2026

Dimension	Objective	Primary Instrument(s)	Key Partner(s)	Balancing Target	Strategic Outcome (as of 2026)
Quad / Indo-Pacific	Constrain Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific while avoiding formal	Minilateral security dialogue; joint exercises; technology and defence cooperation (zone balancing)	United States, Japan, Australia; widening web with France, UK, Germany	China (indirectly; framed as 'free and open Indo-Pacific', not anti-China)	Deepened defence-technology ties; India's Indo-Pacific profile raised; no binding alliance incurred

²³ EAM Jaishankar Stresses Dynamic Foreign Policy At Munich Security Conference 2026 (n 13)

	alliance commitment				
Russia	Preserve energy security and defence-supply diversity; hedge against Western overdependence	Discounted crude-oil imports; legacy defence procurement; ‘studied neutrality’ at the UN	Russia	Overreliance on any single major-power bloc (US/West); indirectly, drift of Russia into China’s orbit	Russia became India’s largest crude supplier; US tariffs imposed in 2025 as a cost of this hedge
China (LAC border track)	De-escalate a live military confrontation while sustaining external balancing elsewhere	Special Representative talks; disengagement agreements (Depsang, Demchok); leader-level summitry	China	China (directly, on the border track) while simultaneously balancing China externally via the Quad	Disengagement completed at friction points; normalisation without resolution of the underlying dispute
Institutional balancing	Reposition India as an indispensable bridge	G20 presidency; Voice of Global South Summit; BRICS	G20 membership; BRICS grouping;	Both Western-anchored and China/Russia	African Union admitted to G20; BRICS kept from

	between developed and developing worlds	chairmanship; AU's G20 admission	Global South coalition	-led institutional agendas (prevents capture by either)	becoming an explicitly anti-Western bloc, at the cost of consensus (2026 Outcome Document)
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Read together, the table shows a consistent structural pattern that supports this paper's definition of tactical balancing in Section 3: in each dimension, India pursues an instrument that is reversible and non-binding, targets either a single rival power or the risk of overdependence on any one bloc, and produces gains that are real but incomplete or partially offset by cost – US tariffs in the Russia case, an unresolved boundary dispute in the China case, and a consensus-less BRICS Outcome Document in the institutional case. This recurring pattern of partial, contested gain is itself evidence against reading India's conduct as either wholly successful multipolar strategy or wholly opportunistic drift, a tension examined further below.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF INDIA'S TACTICAL BALANCING

India's balancing strategy has attracted sustained scholarly criticism, much of it published in the EPW, for the ambiguities and contradictions it generates. One recurring critique is that the pursuit of strategic autonomy across so many simultaneous relationships risks becoming an end in itself rather than a coherent strategy, producing what one 2024 EPW analysis called a 'luxury' that India can less easily afford as global crises multiply, from the war in Ukraine to conflict in the Middle East and continued Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.²⁴

A second and closely related critique concerns consistency. The EPW's 2026 commentary on the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting argued that India's increasing alignment with US, Israeli, and Gulf positions on certain issues, including its acceptance of US pressure on Russian oil imports,

²⁴ Anuradha M Chenoy, 'India's Foreign Policy and the Luxury of Strategic Autonomy' (2024) 59(17) Economic and Political Weekly <<https://www.epw.in/journal/2024/17/strategic-affairs/indias-foreign-policy-and-luxury-strategic.html>> accessed 13 August 2026

tariffs, and investment, sits uneasily with its parallel claims to uphold multipolarity, Global South solidarity, and strategic autonomy, suggesting that ‘national interest’ can become an elastic justification for positions that are difficult to reconcile with India’s own stated principles. Hall’s academic assessment reaches a related conclusion from a different angle, describing multi-alignment as fundamentally a compromise among competing factions within India’s foreign-policy establishment rather than a settled doctrine, and questioning whether it can persist unchanged as the regional order continues to shift.

These critiques converge on a single underlying question that this paper treats as its central counterargument: is India genuinely pursuing multipolar equilibrium as a normative and strategic goal in its own right, or is ‘multipolarity’ primarily a legitimating discourse that provides intellectual coherence to what is, in practice, pragmatic national-interest maximisation through multi-alignment? The evidence surveyed in this paper does not permit a clean resolution of this question, but it does allow two observations that bear on it. First, applying the five criteria set out in Section 3, several of India’s most consequential moves – the scale of the Russian oil pivot after 2022, the tilt toward US–Israel–UAE positions noted by Chenoy, and the calibrated normalisation with China after Kazan satisfy the trigger, issue-specificity, and reversibility criteria for tactical balancing, but their strategic rationale (criterion five) is more plausibly read as short-term interest maximisation than as a considered contribution to a coherent multipolar order; India’s own statements invoke multipolarity more consistently as justification after the fact than as a specified end-state being planned toward. Second, and in partial tension with the first point, the institutional record particularly the AU’s G20 admission and India’s resistance to BRICS being captured by an explicitly anti-Western agenda is harder to explain purely as national-interest maximisation, since these outcomes cost India political capital without delivering a clearly identifiable, narrow national benefit, and are more consistent with a genuine, if instrumentally motivated, interest in a more distributed international order. The most defensible reading, on the evidence available, is therefore that India’s balancing behaviour is predominantly national-interest maximisation operating through the mechanisms of multi-alignment, within which a smaller but real multipolar commitment is pursued opportunistically wherever it is low-cost rather than a scenario in which multipolar equilibrium is the primary goal and national interest a secondary consideration.

A third challenge is external pressure that tests the limits of multi-alignment. The imposition of

steep US tariffs on Indian goods in 2025 over continued Russian oil purchases demonstrated that even a power as important to Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy as India is not immune to coercive economic pressure when its balancing choices diverge from US preferences. Scholars associated with ISAS in Singapore have similarly cautioned that India's continuing dependence on Russian arms supplies, even as it deepens security cooperation with the Quad, could itself become a constraint on India's freedom of action vis-à-vis China in a future crisis.²⁵ Whether India can sustain simultaneous close partnerships with Washington, Moscow, and an assortment of Global South capitals without eventually being forced to choose more explicitly between them remains, on the evidence surveyed here, an open and closely watched question in Indian strategic commentary.

CONCLUSION

Over roughly the past decade, India's foreign policy has evolved from a residual, defensive non-alignment into an actively managed, tactical form of balance-of-power diplomacy. Rather than choosing a single patron or forming a formal alliance against any one power, India has simultaneously deepened security and technology cooperation with the United States and its Quad partners to constrain Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific; sustained and even expanded its economic and defence relationship with Russia to preserve energy security and hedge against overdependence on the West; pursued incremental, negotiated de-escalation with China along the LAC even while strengthening external balancing mechanisms against it; and used its leadership of institutions such as the G20 and BRICS to reposition itself as an indispensable bridge between the developed and developing world.

This paper's distinctive contribution is to move beyond describing this behaviour and toward operationalising it: by specifying five criteria: trigger, issue-specificity, simultaneity, reversibility, and articulable strategic rationale, the paper offers a replicable basis for distinguishing tactical balancing from the broader categories of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, hedging, soft balancing, and zone balancing with which it is often conflated in both policy commentary and academic writing. Applying these criteria across four issue-areas shows that Indian conduct meets the structural conditions for tactical balancing consistently, but that

²⁵ Chilamkuri Raja Mohan, 'Ukraine and India's Strategic Autonomy: The Russian Twist' (*National University of Singapore*, 04 March 2022) <<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/ukraine-and-indias-strategic-autonomy-the-russian-twist/>> accessed 13 August 2026

the underlying strategic rationale is more securely grounded in national-interest maximisation than in a settled commitment to multipolar equilibrium as an end in itself, with the partial exception of India's institutional conduct in the G20 and BRICS.

The evidence drawn from government statements, English-language policy journalism, and peer-reviewed scholarship suggests that this approach has delivered India tangible gains – a stronger claim to great-power status, expanded strategic partnerships across ideological lines, and an outsized voice in shaping multilateral agendas on issues from global biofuels to Global South debt relief. At the same time, the same sources reveal recurring strain: the ambiguity generated by holding contradictory positions simultaneously, the vulnerability created by continued dependence on Russian arms and, increasingly, Russian oil, and the periodic exposure to great-power coercion when balancing choices provoke a powerful partner's displeasure, as seen in the 2025 US tariff episode. India's balance-of-power diplomacy, in other words, is neither a purely defensive reflex nor an unqualified strategic success; it is an ongoing, tactical exercise in managing multiple, sometimes conflicting, power relationships in service of an explicitly multipolar vision of world order – one that Jaishankar has described not as a slogan but as 'a framework for stabilising global politics'.²⁶

²⁶ 'Jaishankar Reinforces India's Push for Multipolar World Order and Adherence to International Law amid Venezuela Crisis' *Indian Republic* (20 January 2026) <<https://www.indianrepublic.in/2026/01/jaishankar-europe-multipolar-world-india-weimar-format-meeting.html>> accessed 13 August 2026