

Zsolt Trembeczki: Drone War, Trade War, Illusory Alternatives: Lessons from 2025 about India's Multi-Alignment Strategy¹

Executive Summary

- The early 2020s' favourable geopolitical environment brought about some remarkable successes in India's foreign policy; yet these achievements stemmed less from deliberate strategy than from external circumstances.
- India's multi-aligned policy faced its first genuine stress test in 2025, as the United States turned against New Delhi. India's assumption that shared strategic interests and strong personal ties with Washington's leadership would guarantee it a privileged place in U.S. Asia policy rested on a misreading of the second Trump era's personality-driven diplomacy.
- During the spring 2025 Indo-Pak conflict, New Delhi received only limited support—mirroring its own traditionally limited commitments to its partners. To avoid a repeat, India must decide whether it is willing to pay a comparable price for tangible U.S. and European assistance.
- While frameworks such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), along with India's bilateral ties with China and Russia, may offer short-term manoeuvring space, they do not constitute realistic alternatives to strategic partnership with the United States.
- In the long term, India remains the weakest member of the great power club—more vulnerable than well-prepared for a transactional, multipolar order.

In 2025, after several years of foreign policy success, India was forced to confront the reality that these achievements had heavily relied on a favourable geopolitical and global economic environment—and consequently might not last forever. relative isolation it faced during the conflict with Pakistan, the escalating trade dispute with the United States, and a rapprochement born of necessity with China all revealed that multi-alignment is no panacea but a strategy that requires constant, delicate maneuvering. In an optimistic reading, the question of the coming months and years is whether India will be able to strengthen its position among the world's leading powers—but the events of 2025 have exposed the fragility of that very position.

1. Introduction

The first half of the 2020s seemed to mark the heyday of India's multi-aligned foreign policy. Although its definition and conceptual novelty are not uncontested, the architects of the multi-alignment strategy presented it as a deliberate departure from the country's earlier, more rigidly non-aligned stance. Abandoning strict equidistance between other centres of power while mindful of preserving its strategic autonomy, India began proactively engaging with a range of partners, entering into partnerships of varying depths on varying issues—freely navigating the “transactionalist bazaar”² of an emerging multipolar world.

Commonly cited examples for this policy include the strengthening of the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership in response to China's growing influence; India's participation in multilateral fora such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), both of which count China among their members; the maintenance of high-level ties with Russia and the surge in energy im-

ports after 2022; as well as India's positioning of itself as a leader of the Global South within the United

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² JAISHANKAR, S.: The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World, 2022, Harper Collins: Gurgaon, p. 39.

Nations and the G20. The favourable press India enjoyed in the first half of the 2020s—reports on its emergence as the world's most populous country (in early 2023); its position as the fastest-growing major economy since 2021 and further growth prospects stemming from its demographic dividend; its execution of the first successful automated Lunar landing in the water-ice-rich southern polar region (in the summer of 2023); the reputational success of hosting the G20 summit (in the autumn of 2023), and India's adept balancing between its Western and Russian partners—lent some credibility for this strategy.³

Emboldened by these successes, India's self-assured leaders—among them, Prime Minister Narendra Modi (in office since 2014) and his external affairs minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (since 2019)—were convinced that Donald Trump's second term would only further strengthen Indo-U.S. bilateral relations and India's overall strategic position. This appeared to be supported by the bipartisan consensus in Washington that seemed to surround India, the progress achieved in the bilateral relations during the first Trump administration (2017–2021), as well as the ideological affinity and cordial personal rapport between Modi and Trump.⁴ Meanwhile, in the spirit of multi-alignment, India stood ready to continue the gradual normalisation of its relations with China⁵ (having severely deteriorated since 2020), and to continue reaping massive profits from the re-export of Russian energy.⁶

By contrast, 2025 brought a series of disappointments, particularly in India–United States relations. In April, Modi's friendship with Trump did not shield India from the "Liberation Day" tariff barrage.⁷ In May, despite declarations condemning terrorism, the global community did not rally behind India and against Pakistan when the former launched Operation Sindoor its retaliation for the Pahalgam terror attack. Despite India's military superiority, Pakistan spread the narrative of a balanced outcome with some success, while the United States publicly claimed credit for mediating the ensuing ceasefire. In July and August, after months of trade talks, the Trump administration hit India with a punitive 50 per cent tariff rate. Still, while Modi's participation in SCO's Tianjin summit in September generated media attention, a pivot towards the Sino–Russian axis is no realistic alternative to political, security, technological, and economic cooperation with the United States.

Thus, while the past decade has demonstrated the advantages of India's multi-alignment, the developments of 2025 offer important lessons about its limitations.

2. *En attendant Trump*: The Strategic, Ideological, and Personal Roots of India's Overoptimism

Unlike most of its U.S. allies, including most NATO member states, Japan, and South Korea, India looked forward to a possible second term for President Donald Trump even prior to the 2024 presidential election. This optimism rested on three pillars: (1) the flourishing of bilateral relations during Trump's first administration; (2) the ideological affinity between Trump and Modi, two right-wing nationalist leaders; and (3) the cordial personal relationship between the two leaders. All three factors contributed to India's optimism, though with varying weight, which commentators often misunderstand.

In the strategic dimension, India-related policies under Trump's first term coherently linked the Obama and Biden administrations, reinforcing the impression of a bipartisan consensus in Washington. At the same time, Trump's presidency marked a paradigm shift, recasting China from a constructive partner into a dangerous adversary.

³ GREATER PACIFIC CAPITAL: [India's G20 Presidency Spotlights the Drivers of its Growth Engine](#), 2023. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

⁴ MISHRA, Vivek: [The India-U.S. Story: Biden's Legacy and Trump 2.0](#), Observer Research Foundation, 2025.02.07. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

⁵ LEVESQUES, A. & SOLANKI, V.: [Prospects for India-China relations](#), International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025.05.16. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

⁶ VAID, Manish: [Russia's Energy Pivot: India Replaces China as Key Energy Ally](#), Observer Research Foundation, 2025.05.30. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

⁷ HARITHAS, Barath, MENG, Kyle & MOURADIAN, Catherine: ["Liberation Day" Tariffs Explained](#), CSIS, 2025.04.03. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

In contrast, the significance of ideological similarity is smaller than many⁸ assume. Although the Democratic Party's left wing and the left-leaning press frequently criticised India's democratic backsliding, the Biden administration (2021–2025) pragmatically isolated these criticisms from bilateral relations,⁹ preventing them from causing any serious disruption.

To be sure, Trump's personal disposition was crucial to India's optimism—only not for ideological reasons but because of his personal relationship with Modi. Many have tried to explain Trump's idiosyncratic, norm-breaking, and often chaotic diplomatic style with the presence of some deeper, underlying strategic though¹⁰ or coherent geopolitical visions,¹¹ but these are largely mere intellectualisations. A series of outcomes often at odds even with the stated goals of the new administration¹² or intelligible only in light of clearly unrealistic objectives¹³ suggest that the primary source of American foreign policy volatility¹⁴ lies indeed in the Trump-centric personification—meaning, on this issue more mainstream and superficial commentaries are correct. Like other U.S. partners,¹⁵ India's leaders reached this same conclusion, only it filled them with confidence: the cordial relationship the two leaders had maintained since the first Trump term—including occasional support for each other's domestic political campaigns¹⁶—provided a basis for New Delhi to continue relying on this personal nexus in the second term.¹⁷

3. From Pahalgam to Trade War: The *Annus Horribilis* of Indo-U.S. Relations

Buoyed by these prospects, in February 2025 Narendra Modi was among the first foreign leaders to pay a personal visit to the newly inaugurated President Donald Trump. In the months that followed, however, India faced indifferent, humiliating, and eventually outright hostile U.S. behaviour across several issues.

The February visit did not prove catastrophic, but it fell short of fulfilling the hopes attached to it. The leaders agreed to raise bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030, yet Trump offered no exemption for India from his soon-to-come wave of tariffs, and even publicly criticised India's own protectionist tariffs. Trade negotiations started in earnest in March. New Delhi—which had already prepared symbolic concessions for Modi's Washington visit—made further significant, substantive concessions.¹⁸ Given India's traditional aversion to free trade, these concessions would have amounted to nothing less than a massive breakthrough in any previous round of talks. Indeed, by mid-summer, leaders and negotiators on both sides indicated that reaching an agreement was imminent.¹⁹

The first serious rupture arose from the American handling of the May 2025 armed conflict between India and Pakistan. India held Pakistan responsible for the 22 April Pahalgam terrorist attack, which

⁸ See, for instance, PARIKH, Tej: [„Why India's Hindu Nationalists Love Donald Trump”,](#) *The Diplomat*, 2017.02.28. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

⁹ PATEL, Ricken: [„Why is Biden silent on Modi and India's slide toward autocracy?”,](#) *Los Angeles Times*, 2023.01.20. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁰ FATSIADOU, Aspasia: [„Strategic Intent, Structural Void: Understanding Donald Trump's Disruptive Foreign Policy Doctrine”,](#) *Modern Diplomacy*, 2025.04.23. [Online: Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹¹ MALIK, Nesrine: [„There is a clear Trump doctrine. Those who can't see it won't have a say in reshaping the world”,](#) *The Guardian*, 2025.02.24. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹² MALIK, Nesrine: [„Trump's retreat from Nato was priced in. But his humiliation of Qatar and India spells total chaos”,](#) *The Guardian*, 2025.09.15. [Online, 2025.09.20.]; SCHMITT, Olivier: [„Why a Rapid U.S. Withdrawal From Europe Will Reinforce China”,](#) Carnegie Endowment, 2024.12.17. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹³ CAMPBELL, Garrett: [„The Trump Administration's Pursuit of a Sino-Russian Schism”,](#) FPRI, 2025.04.10. [Online, 2025.09.20.] Beyond the Horizon: [„Trump's Gamble: Is the U.S. Trading NATO for a Russia-China Split?”,](#) 2025.02.25. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁴ PLAGEMANN, Johannes: [„How Unpredictable is Trump's Foreign Policy Set to Be?”,](#) German Institute for Global and Area Studies, 2024.11.25. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁵ CSOBÁNCI Ádám: [„Bro-Politics in Action: Trump and the „Personalization” of Foreign Policy”,](#) Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik, 2025.01. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁶ HOLLAND, Steve & PAL, Alasdair: [„Namaste Trump': Modi holds huge rally for Trump's visit”,](#) *Reuters*, 2020.02.24. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁷ GANGULY, Sumit: [„In Washington, Trump and Modi Could Build on Rapport”,](#) *Foreign Policy*, 2025.02.07. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁸ BASU, Nayanima: [„India-U.S. Trade Agreement nearing reality”,](#) Gateway House, 2025.06.13. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

¹⁹ *Deccan Herald*: [„Donald Trump hints at trade deal with India soon; says US will have access to Indian market”,](#) 2025.07.16. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

claimed twenty-six civilian lives, and when on 7 May it launched Operation Sindoor to retaliate, it interpreted Washington's initial indifference²⁰ as an implicit green light for teaching Islamabad a lesson. Already by this point, however, New Delhi was frustrated that much of the international community—including strategic partners such as the United States, Russia, or the European Union—did not accept the indirect evidence pointing to Pakistan's involvement and instead called on both sides to show restraint.

This relative diplomatic isolation illustrated the limits of multi-alignment: India, which under its non-alignment and later multi-alignment doctrines rarely offered substantive solidarity to others, could expect little solidarity in return.²¹ In 2022, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar had dismissed, with biting sarcasm, the suggestion that Europe's security concerns regarding Russia should in any way factor into India's own relations with Russia.²² Similarly, India has tended to avoid tangible security commitments to the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies²³ (even while cooperating robustly with them in other areas) and at the same time expected rival Western, as well as Russian and Chinese, partners to apply pressure on Pakistan. To little surprise, India's partners were rather reluctant to subordinate their own relations with Pakistan to New Delhi's demands.

The military outcome of the conflict with Pakistan was also mildly disappointing. The fighting, conducted with fighter jets, drones, and artillery, lasted roughly four days (resulting in far fewer than a hundred casualties in total) and ended with a ceasefire on 10 May. Although India effectively dictated the dynamics of the escalation and demonstrated far more extensive and precise strike and air defence capabilities than its opponent, Pakistan portrayed the initial competent performance of its air force as a near victory—a narrative largely picked up by the international media. The resulting "reputational stalemate" was quite humiliating for India.²⁴

Even more embarrassing was Trump's announcement, made before any official declaration, that the "full and immediate" ceasefire was the result of U.S. mediation.²⁵ He later claimed that he had forced both sides to back down through threats of trade sanctions.²⁶ India continues to reject this interpretation, emphasising that it had set clear conditions for ending the fighting from the outset, and that Pakistan simply submitted to these demands. Crucially, New Delhi has traditionally rejected any third-party mediation vis-a-vis its western neighbour, as such intervention would necessarily favour the weaker party. Furthermore, India is particularly sensitive to statements framing the two countries within a "hyphenated" (India–Pakistan) problem complex or implying moral equivalence between them.²⁷ Pakistan, by contrast, eagerly embraced the Trump narrative, even nominating the president for the Nobel Peace Prize. This gave an unexpected boost to U.S.–Pakistani bilateral relations,²⁸ while the India–U.S. relationship and the Modi–Trump nexus suffered serious damage.²⁹

²⁰ SINGH, Kanishka: [„US VP Vance says war between India and Pakistan will be 'none of our business'”, Reuters, 2025.05.09. \[Online, 2025.09.20.\]](#)

²¹ PILLALAMARRI, Akilesh: [„India's Geopolitical Position After 'Operation Sindoor'”, The Diplomat, 2025.05.29. \[Online, 2025.09.20.\]](#)

²² BARMAN, Sourav Roy: [„Europe has to grow out of mindset that its problems are world's problems: Jaishankar”, The Indian Express, 2022.06.04. \[Online, 2025.09.20.\]](#)

²³ TELLIS, Ashley: [„America's Bad Bet on India”, Foreign Affairs, 2023.05.01. \[Online, 2025.09.21.\]](#)

²⁴ TREMBECZKI, Zsolt: [Four Takeaways from the 2025 India–Pakistan Conflict](#), 2025, HIIA Policy Brief, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

²⁵ TRUMP, Donald: [„After a long night of talks mediated by the United States...”, Truth Social, 2025.05.10. \[Online, 2025.09.21.\]](#)

²⁶ *The Hindu*: [Used trade deal threat to get India-Pakistan ceasefire, says Trump](#), 2025.06.26. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

²⁷ SAHA, Rushali: *India-Pakistan ceasefire: Modi faces "re-hyphenation" challenge after Trump's Kashmir mediation claims*, 2025.05.12. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

²⁸ AAMIR, Adnan: [How Pakistan won over the US leadership after years of isolation](#), Lowy Institute, 2025.07.25. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

²⁹ MASHAL, Mujib, PAGER, Tyler & DAS, Anupreeta: [The Nobel Prize and a Testy Phone Call: How the Trump-Modi Relationship Unraveled](#), *The New York Times*, 2025.08.30. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

The erosion of trust quickly left its mark on trade negotiations.³⁰ By mid-July, India was still anticipating a final tariff level of 10–15 per cent,³¹ but by the end of the month the talks got stuck: Trump demanded full access to India's agricultural markets—a demand wholly unacceptable for India, where the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of farmers would be jeopardised. At this stage, Indian leaders had not yet grasped the full extent of the second Trump administration's hyper-transactionalism—that is, the degree to which short-term trade and reputational gains are prioritised over longer-term strategic considerations (including the underlying trust between strategic partners). Thus they did not foresee that Washington would genuinely be willing to risk the collapse of negotiations. Confusing messaging around other U.S. trade deals, combined with Trump's boastful style,³² also gave India little incentive to offer further concessions. During the same period, Trump's frustration over Russia also grew due to Moscow showing no inclination to reciprocate the President's successive gestures of goodwill with a more constructive approach to peace mediation in Ukraine. In response, India, as one of the major importers of Russian energy, was singled out for demonstrative retaliation.³³

Although at that point some advisors still hoped that a direct Modi-Trump phone call could break the deadlock, Modi (under pressure from the domestic opposition) was unwilling to risk exposing himself to another round of public humiliation from Trump.³⁴ At the end of July, Trump imposed a 25 per cent tariff on India, followed in early August by an additional 25 per cent in response to energy imports from Russia.³⁵ The combined 50 per cent tariff came into effect on 27 August, making India—tied with Brazil, far ahead of the likes of China, Russia, or North Korea—the world's most heavily tariffed country under the current U.S. administration.³⁶

4. India's Missteps: Strategic Overconfidence, Flawed Psychologising

Either the handling of the Pakistan conflict or the trade war in itself would have been enough to make 2025 the worst year for India–U.S. relations since the 1998 nuclear tests. The damage could become particularly enduring if India–U.S. relations gain salience as a culture war issue in the United States. There are already signs of this: several representatives of the MAGA ("Make America Great Again") movement around President Trump are increasingly demanding restrictions on the immigration of Indians, previously widely regarded as a model community.³⁷

All of these developments ran directly counter to over a decade of U.S. strategy in South Asia and the Asia/Indo-Pacific region—a strategy that prioritised India, a pluralist democracy sharing threat perceptions around China, over Pakistan, an unreliable partner against terrorism and a key Chinese ally. It was, however, a direct consequence of the personification of U.S. foreign policy, something Pakistan skillfully exploited but Indian leaders approached too pridefully. Ultimately, and despite scattered attempts to ideologise it,³⁸ the weakening of India–U.S. relations has been one of the second Trump administration's

³⁰ TREMBECZKI Zsolt: [From Breakthrough to Breakdown: The Near Collapse of U.S.–India Trade Talks and What Comes Next](#), HIIA Perspective, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2025. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

³¹ *The New Indian Express*: ["US-India trade talks: Tariff on Indian goods could end up around 10–15%"](#), 2025.07.18. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

³² TANG, Francis: ["Trump: The \\$550 billion pledged by Japan is 'our money'"](#), *The Japan Times*, 2025.08.06. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

³³ TREMBECZKI Zsolt: [From Breakthrough to Breakdown: The Near Collapse of U.S.–India Trade Talks and What Comes Next](#), HIIA Perspective, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2025. [Online, 2025.09.20.]

³⁴ KUMAR, Manoj, HUNNICUTT, Trevor & AHMED, Aftab: ["Missed signals, lost deal: How India-US trade talks collapsed"](#), *Reuters*, 2025.08.06.; DESROCHERS, Daniel & MESSERLY, Megan: ["He is completely upset": Why Trump scrapped an India trade deal"](#), *Politico*, 2025.08.08. [Online, 2025.09.21.]

³⁵ The White House: [Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Addresses Threats to the United States by the Government of the Russian Federation](#), 2025.08.06. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

³⁶ LOWELL, Michael et al.: [Trump 2.0 tariff tracker](#), 2025.09.18., ReedSmith Trade Compliance Resource Hub. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

³⁷ AXELROD, Tal & BASU, Zachary: ["MAGA escalates U.S.–India tensions into cultural clash"](#), *Axios*, 2025.09.04. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

³⁸ See, for instance, YOUNUS, Uzair: ["The US Is Rethinking the India-Pakistan Dynamic"](#), *The Diplomat*, 2025.09.03. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

greatest foreign policy blunders. Yet Indian leaders also bear responsibility for, as described above, being caught off-guard, and having misjudged both the importance of their country in the eyes of Washington policymakers and the true nature of the Trump–Modi relationship.

To the first point, India clearly overestimated the bipartisan consensus regarding the importance of India–U.S. relations³⁹ While both Democrats and Republicans criticised Trump’s actions towards New Delhi, the former refrained from robustly supporting India due to Modi’s illiberal image, while the latter were hesitant out of fear of criticising the president, resulting in neither coming unequivocally to India’s aid. On the second point, Indian leaders correctly recognised that Trump’s foreign policy was becoming increasingly personalised, but they misjudged its exact nature. Contrary to superficial interpretations, this personalisation does not make other leaders’ personal relationship with the president the decisive factor. Rather, the decisive factor is whether other leaders momentarily enable or frustrate the president’s short-term personal dispositions. Enabling these dispositions can quickly repair previously poor relations (as in the case of Pakistan), while if denying them not even erstwhile “friends” are safe from Trump’s retaliation.

From this rule only a narrow group of leaders whom Trump regards as equals enjoy an exception. Modi’s further misjudgement was to assume that he, too, also belonged to this club, alongside with the “desired friend” President Vladimir Putin of Russia and the “worthy adversary” President Xi Jinping of China. In reality, Trump does not consider Modi an “equal strongman,” and thus seeks not his approval or agreement, but (as with his NATO and Indo-Pacific allies) his submission and subordination. When Modi withheld these in the contexts of ceasefire mediation, the trade negotiations, and energy imports from Russia, their previous friendship offered India no protection from American retaliation.

5. China, BRICS, SCO: No Viable Alternatives

To the United States’ unreliability India reacted with a conspicuous display of “multi-aligned” diplomacy. Modi was adamant that he was prepared to pay a “heavy price” to protect Indian farmers,⁴⁰ and participated with long-unseen enthusiasm in the 2025 Tianjin summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This was Modi’s first visit to China in seven years (after the 2020 border clashes following the Covid-19 pandemic had plunged Sino–Indian relations into crisis), and his first in-person SCO participation since 2022 (the 2023 India-hosted summit having been downgraded to an online format by the host, who at that time still favoured an American orientation, and the 2024 summit being attended only by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar). The prime minister’s visit was prepared in August during Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval’s visit to Beijing and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to New Delhi.

In this context, Modi’s personal participation was in itself a powerful political statement (even though its organisation had begun before the imposition of U.S. punitive tariffs),⁴¹ and the details of his public appearances were clearly calibrated as a response to confrontational American policies. Prior to the official meetings, the prime minister spent more than an hour in the limousine of President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and the international press circulated images of the Indian, Russian, and Chinese leaders together, radiating ease and camaraderie⁴²—a sharp contrast with the optics of the Trump–Putin meeting in Alaska.⁴³ Modi and Xi also declared that India and China are partners, not rivals, raising some hopes regarding the continuation of the cautious normalisation that had begun late in the previous year (albeit from a very deep post-2020 baseline). Modi’s trip to Tianjin ultimately underscored that, unlike its European and East Asian allies, India was unwilling to flatter Donald Trump with gestures of subservience.

³⁹ VAISHNAV, Milan, MADAN, Tanvi & DHUME, SADANAND: [“Trade Wars: Trump Targets India”](#), *Grand Tamasha* [podcast], 2025.08.12., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴⁰ SHARMA, Harikishan: [“‘I’m ready to pay the price’: PM Modi draws red line, says no compromise on farmers amid rising US trade pressure”](#), *The Indian Express*, 2025.08.08. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴¹ HUNNICUTT, Trevor, BRUNNSTROM, David & SPETALNICK, Matt: [“As Trump chills US-India ties, Modi warms to China and Russia”](#), *Reuters*, 2025.09.03. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴² PIERSON, David & MASHAL, Mujib: [“Smiles and Clapsed Hands as Xi, Putin and Modi Try to Signal Unity”](#), *The New York Times*, 2025.09.01. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴³ Chatham House: [“Trump-Putin meeting on Ukraine: Early analysis from Chatham House experts”](#), 2025.08.16. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

Interpretations that see a fundamental geopolitical realignment⁴⁴ in the visit are, however, exaggerated. While the lasting damage to the India–U.S. strategic partnership is now scarcely in doubt, a fundamental shift in India’s orientation from its U.S. partnership towards the China–Russia axis (or even the Global South, or the European Union) remains extremely unlikely, even within the paradigm of multi-alignment; and would not serve India’s true national interest. China represents too great an objective security threat for such a pivot to happen; Russia’s balancing potential is too limited; the European Union’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is too indirect; and the Global South does not constitute a coherent geopolitical bloc.

Going one by one: while the United States’ tactless behaviour during the spring 2025 conflict was deeply resented in India, China directly supported Pakistan’s operations with advanced military assets and real-time intelligence sharing.⁴⁵ Beijing is also unlikely to make concessions to placate New Delhi regarding the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through Kashmir (a territory claimed by India) or to meaningfully address India’s increasingly significant national security concerns over China’s trade surplus. In principle, the forward positions occupied along the disputed border in 2020 could be withdrawn, but the precise delineation of the Line of Actual Control (LOAC), let alone a final resolution of the territorial disputes, is almost inconceivable in the foreseeable future. In the medium term, with China’s economic slowdown, India’s growth, and the gradual narrowing of the power gap, it is likely that China’s currently dismissive threat perception of India will increase rather than diminish. The two countries’ relative geographic positions further push them towards strained relations. From China’s perspective, the expansion of India’s naval footprint in the central part of the Indian Ocean (and its vital maritime routes) is a serious risk, irrespective of India’s short-term intentions. Meanwhile from India’s perspective, China’s inevitably growing patrolling presence near its waters, coupled with increasing political, economic, and military influence in other South Asian countries, already creates a sense of encirclement. These inherent clashes of interest can be kept on a peaceful course through persistent, prudent diplomacy, but they place a trust ceiling on Sino-Indian bilateral relations even lower than that characterising India–U.S. relations.

Contrary to the hopes of Indian strategists, Russia cannot serve as a counterweight to China in the foreseeable future: even before Moscow’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it had pursued a close strategic partnership with Beijing, and since then has effectively been relegated to a junior partner.⁴⁶ In the event of a sharp Sino-Indian conflict, Russia is unlikely to exert any meaningful pressure (beyond a posture of benevolent neutrality) on China, which has stood by it during the war in Ukraine. While there remain tangible benefits in Russo-Indian relations, particularly with respect to the joint production and development of military equipment, Moscow cannot replace India’s Western partnerships in the economic or technological domains. Income from the re-export of Russian energy is likely to be annulled by American sanctions, and within arms imports, India is already seeking to reduce its once overwhelming dependence on Russia.

Alongside the major powers of BRICS and the SCO, the European Union may be considered a potential balancing partner for India. In certain areas, this partnership could provide the most viable alternative to U.S. orientation. The successful conclusion of ongoing India–EU free trade negotiations would grant India access to a market comparable in size and sophistication to that of the United States, while also positioning both parties as responsible pillars of global trade.⁴⁷ Defence collaboration is likewise a fruitful area: French-manufactured Rafale is the most advanced jet fighter the Indian Air Force operates, and the Indian Navy’s new diesel-powered submarines will be supplied by Germany’s ThyssenKrupp Marine. Yet genuinely deep strategic partnership is limited by India’s intimate relations with Russia, and by

⁴⁴ RICHTER, Amelie: [„SCO meeting: Modi travels to China for the first time in seven years”](#), *Table*, 2025.08.07. [Online, 2025.09.22.]; BHASIN, Sumeer: [„SCO at 25: Asia’s Geopolitical Recalibration and India’s Pivotal Choice”](#), *Chintan*, India Foundation Blogs, 2025.09.08. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴⁵ PUBBY, Manu: [„China gave live support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor: Deputy Chief, Army”](#), *The Economic Times*, 2025.07.05. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴⁶ MANZYUK, Alexander: [China-Russia trade: asymmetrical, yet indispensable](#), Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2025.05.07. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴⁷ SAINI, Gaurav: [Improving India-Europe Defence Cooperation: A New Arms Deal?](#) New Delhi: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2024.

Europe's complex, but far less sceptical, stance towards China⁴⁸ compared with India's threat perceptions. India and Europe can be highly valuable secondary partners for one another, and robustly developing these relationships is in both sides' eminent interest. Significant differences in threat perceptions, however, preclude them from becoming each other's primary strategic partners.

Overall, the United States remains the only major power whose interests vis-à-vis China fundamentally coincide with India's, while there being no direct geopolitical clash of interest between Washington and New Delhi. Although U.S. behaviour in 2025 inflicted serious damage on bilateral relations, the foundations of the partnership have not gone away. India continues to rely on Western (including American) markets, technology, and defence cooperation. There are also signs that Washington has not given up on India-U.S. strategic partnership either: Donald Trump telephoned Narendra Modi on 17 September to mark his birthday,⁴⁹ and Indian Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal visited Washington later that month to revive trade negotiations.⁵⁰

For these reasons, a return to "non-alignment" or "multi-alignment" with equidistant postures, or alignment with the China-Russia axis against the United States, remains a very unlikely scenario. The most probable outcome is that, despite the damages incurred in 2025, the India-U.S. strategic partnership aimed against China will endure, while India increases its efforts to reduce the likelihood of direct confrontation with China, preserve its remaining influence in Moscow, and expand economic, technological, and defence cooperation with U.S. allies such as Europe, Japan, and Australia.

The paradigm of multi-alignment is fundamentally well-suited to executing this strategy. New Delhi, however, must prepare for the fact that the multipolar world order it has for decades urged for, complemented by the initially welcomed hyper-transactionalist approach of Trump, will be far less favourable to India than the country's strategic community currently believes.

6. India Is Less Prepared for the New World Order Than Its Leaders and Citizens Believe

Since Independence, Indian foreign policy has undergone numerous adjustments, yet its constant guiding principle has been that India should constitute an autonomous pole in a world free of rigid opposing blocs. After the Cold War, this vision was expressed through the conceptual framework or an advocacy for a multipolar world order, and later (particularly under the tenure of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar since 2019) through the strategic concept of multi-alignment.

Following Donald Trump's first term and subsequent political return it has also become a widespread view that, by virtue of this strategy, India is especially well-prepared for a world that is more transactional, more short-term interest-driven, and displays a more fluid network of ever-shifting partnerships. Indian foreign policy has never been bound by its democratic political system; the partnership with the United States (despite rhetorical appeals to shared values) has always been confined to areas of narrowly understood shared interests; and integration into the global economy remained gradual and selective. Hence, so the argument went, even Trump's return would not come as a shock: India would weather a U.S. turn against free trade or the questioning of traditional alliances better than most.

This image, however, was in large part founded on wishful thinking. India overestimated its bargaining position and interpreted the long-desired multipolar, transactional world order selectively, magnifying its positive implications for its own room for manoeuvre. In reality, much of the relative success India experienced between 2020 and 2025 did not stem from exceptional domestic governance or diplomatic brilliance, but rather from a geopolitical and global economic environment that was fundamentally favourable to India—yet mainly depended on the behaviour of other powers. The key pillars of this environment were: (1) the convergence of Indian and U.S. interests vis-à-vis China—and, as a consequence (despite New Delhi's often reluctant partnership behaviour), the strategic patience that successive U.S. administrations displayed towards India; (2) India's relatively rapid economic growth, which, rather than

⁴⁸ GARCÍA-HERRERO, Alicia & VASSELIER, Abigaël: [Updating the EU strategy on China: co-existence while derisking through partnerships](#), Bruegel Policy Briefs, 2024.10.31. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁴⁹ Bloomberg: [„Trump, Modi Talk in Bid to Calm Tariffs, Russian Oil Dispute”](#), 2025.09.16. [Online, 2025.09.23.]

⁵⁰ The Hindu: [„Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal to visit U.S. on Sept. 22 to 'take forward' trade deal talks”](#), 2025.09.20. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

reflecting effective governance, largely resulted from the country's demographic dividend;⁵¹ and (3) China's slowing economy and deteriorating global reputation.

Even with these favourable factors, in a multipolar, hyper-transactionalist world India would remain the weakest among the strongest powers, exposed to other, far stronger actors' assertion of their short-term interest. India's economy is four and a half times smaller than that of China, and seven times smaller than that of the United States. Even under optimistic growth projections,⁵² these ratios could be reduced at most by about half by the middle of the century. The country's technological and defence manufacturing base is expected to strengthen, yet remains far below China's capacity for self-sufficiency in advanced technologies and military systems. Cooperation with Western powers and with Russia in the technological sphere will thus remain indispensable—India, however, may have to pay a higher price for it in a world increasingly characterised by short-term, self-interested transactionalism.

To be sure, relatively small but agile, flexibly governed, shock-resistant states can manoeuvre with great success even in such an environment. India, alas, is not such a country. Its per capita income remains very low in comparison, and hundreds of millions of its citizens live in economic conditions highly vulnerable to both domestic and external economic disruptions. This constitutes a constant and often paralysing source of political risk for successive Indian governments. India's federal model combines an excessive centralisation of formal competences with, paradoxically, weak central implementation capacity due to administrative underdevelopment. Its diplomatic service, relative to the country's size, remains one of the smallest and most poorly funded in the world.⁵³

As the smallest of the giants, India is by no means a "natural" beneficiary of a multipolar, transactional world order. In such an environment, New Delhi must continuously be on the watch for its partners (once strategically patient towards India but now increasingly assertive) letting their own third-party relations or short-term interests overriding the economic, technological, and defence cooperation upon which India's long-term development depends.

7. Conclusion

After the relative successes of the early 2020s, the year 2025 brought the first true stress test of India's policy of multi-alignment. The second Trump administration's tariff war, Washington's handling of Operation Sindoor following the Pahalgam terrorist attack, and the subsequent imposition of a 50 per cent punitive tariff on Indian exports all demonstrated that the United States' strategic patience can no longer be taken for granted. The events also revealed that a country traditionally inclined towards only limited commitments to its partners can expect similarly restrained support when its own interests and security come under threat.

From late summer on, New Delhi sought to counter growing U.S. pressure through a conspicuous demonstration of its multivectoral diplomacy, most notably by attending the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit held in China at prime-ministerial level. Several commentators interpreted this as a fundamental realignment of Asian geopolitics—a clear exaggeration. While the erosion of trust in the United States is indeed prompting India to cautiously normalise its relations with China, then it comes to the economic, technological, and defence domains the South Asian power remains reliant on U.S. partnership (and, secondarily, on its European, Russian, and Japanese ties) if it is to narrow its gap with China.

Ultimately, India must come to terms with the fact that, although it has long championed a multipolar and transactional world order, within such an order it would itself remain the weakest among the leading powers.

⁵¹ GUPTA, Preeti & CHANDER, Ramesh: [„Demographic Dividend and Economic Growth: An Empirical Study of Transitional India”](#), *European Economic Letters*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 2024. [Online, 2025.09.22.]

⁵² DALY, Kevin & GEDMINAS, Tadas: [The Path to 2075 — Slower Global Growth, But Convergence Remains Intact](#), Goldman Sachs Economics Research, 2022. [Online, 2025.09.23.]

⁵³ MENON, Vandana: [„Understaffed MEA slowing down India's sprint towards 'Vishwa Guru' status, but needle may be moving”](#), *The Print*, 2025.03.08. [Online, 2025.09.23.]



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