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India's External Relations Priorities Accompanying the Current "America First" Policy

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ABSTRACT

India is a pivot in the Indo-Pacific region. It is also a leader of the Global South, defined as a group of emerging and developing countries. As the chair of BRICS starting in January 2026, India focuses on "the importance of strengthening capacities, promoting innovation, and ensuring sustainable development for the benefit of all". Committed to a "reformed multilateralism", a member of the Quad, a strategic partner of Russia, on the way to stabilising its relations with China, but in the absence of a close Sino-Indian relationship, and rejecting the "United States' geopolitical primacy", especially after the American-Indian trade frictions of 2025, India has shown its inclination towards multi-alignment. Based on an extensive literature review and official declarations, this paper is predominantly qualitative. It also includes statistical data to explain India's economic power and growing global role. This paper's main objective is to highlight India's priorities in its external relations, including those shaped by the "America First" Policy. India's response to rising American protectionism and the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, or the path to transform India into a developed nation, combined with its support for "democracy and democratic values and systems" and its interest-based approach with various partners, are among the factors explaining its multi-alignment.

1. Introduction

India's foreign policy is "a mixture of change and continuity in consonance with changes within the country and the outside world" (Bhatia, 2025).

India has chosen to engage with the United States (US) through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and other plurilateral or bilateral agreements, while safeguarding its strategic autonomy (Mungray, 2026). The India-US relationship has evolved into one of the most significant bilateral partnerships of the 21st century, characterised by expanding cooperation across multiple dimensions and deepening strategic convergence. However, significant challenges persist, including trade imbalances, market access issues, intellectual property disputes, technology transfer restrictions, and divergent strategic perspectives on Russia and China (Yadav, 2025). India has strategic partnerships with more than 30 organisations and countries, including China, Russia, and the US, and the intensity of each varies. Its economic and geopolitical goals explain its willingness to counterbalance China, given the two countries' decades of mistrust and border conflicts; at the same time, its internal and external constraints, along with relations across multiple levels, limit its balancing behaviour (Shah & Karki, 2025).

Shortly before the "reciprocal" tariffs were imposed by the US on its trade partners, including India, the most populous country worldwide, represented by its Prime Minister, declared that "when the US and India work together", "Make America Great Again" MAGA together with "Make India Great Again" MIGA (meaning the path towards the developed-economy status) generates "a MEGA partnership for prosperity" (Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). However, on August

27, 2025, new customs duties imposed by the Trump administration on imports from India took effect. Set at a record 50%, these are among the highest customs duties the US has imposed, and they include a 25% penalty on India's transactions with the Russian Federation (i.e., imports of energy and weapons). Since then, the relationship between the US and India has changed, despite both countries' interest in counterbalancing Chinese power in Asia, and has shifted toward the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology (TRUST) (Chaudhuri, 2025; The White House, 2025; Roche, 2025a). The reciprocal tariff rate of 18% announced in February 2026 by the American President meant a relaunch of bilateral relations; however, the trade talks stalled several times, and the agreement has not yet been finalised.

The US and India's original objectives - preserving a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and strengthening the liberal international order – seem to be at risk because of unfavourable developments both in India and in the US. Moreover, India's strategy of multi-alignment amounts to cementing diversified ties with many states, some of which are US adversaries, which affects the US-India strategic partnership (Tellis, 2025). For instance, India participates in the Quad and collaborates with the West on defence production and digital governance, yet continues to maintain robust ties with Russia. This is not considered a contradiction, but "a deliberate strategy of hedging and diversification" (Kalash, 2025). Despite this, India's relationship with the US remains key to its military and security capabilities and economic growth (Solanki, 2025).

The "Trump factor", the deep economic and technological transformations worldwide, the global polycrisis, the world "of growing divisions", on the one hand, and the Indian path towards developed status, and the national response to external threats, on the other hand, such determinants on both sides are shaping India's foreign policy decisions (Lawrence et al., 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025; Bhatia, 2025; D'Souza, 2025). The following statement remains true: "The foremost task of India's foreign policy is to enable the domestic transformation of India" (Rao, 2012).

One can remark on different categories of relations with other countries: based on common interest (with developed countries, with the Global South as a whole, with individual countries such as the US, Russia, etc.), based on cooperation and rivalry (such as China), as well as hostile relations with "enemies" (such as Pakistan). India considers itself a leader of the Global South (historically through Bandung and the Non-Aligned Movement, and more recently through initiatives such as the launch of the "Voice of Global South" summit in 2023, when India held the G20 presidency). However, despite concrete projects and results (synonymous with "delivery and consistency"), its leadership of the Global South is contested (Sending et al., 2025).

This paper starts from the theoretical framework of multi-alignment in the specific case of India. It then briefly describes India's economic strengths and underscores India's role in the BRICS group, an organisation that now includes five new members in addition to the five founding members. It underlines that India balances between the West and the Global South, supporting a BRICS alliance that is not an "Anti-Western" organisation (Jacob, 2026). The two distinct concepts, multi-alignment and strategic autonomy, provide India with the right framework to act successfully on the global stage. The first one is equivalent to engaging with multiple powers at the same time, even if these are fierce competitors. The second means the freedom to make independent decisions to safeguard national interests.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on an extensive literature review, databases, and official declarations, making it predominantly a qualitative comparative analysis. The main objective is to synthesise the most important characteristics of Indian foreign policy. The most appropriate keyword is multi-alignment. The research includes India's priorities as a founding member of the BRICS international organisation. In contrast to China, Russia, and Iran, which "view the BRICS as a

platform to counter Western influence", India, similarly to Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates, considers BRICS as a framework where it can implement its multi-alignment instruments to diversify its global partnerships (Brender, 2024).

3. Literature Review

From a historical perspective, Rauch (2008) identified three phases of Indian foreign policy since independence: (1) during 1947-1965, focused on regional consolidation of power, strongly influenced by the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who championed the policy on non-alignment; (2) the timeframe 1966-1989, with the pre-eminence of the Congress Party represented by Indira Gandhi and later Rajiv Gandhi, with the strategic goals of regional domination policy and rapprochement with the Soviet Union; (3) after 1990, reflecting the "triumph of pragmatism" and a period with various protagonists (after 2014 dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi as Prime Minister), with a new policy towards neighbours; strategic partnership with the US; increasing integration into the regional and international systems (Rauch, 2008). The third overlaps with the second phase of India's economic history since independence in 1947, which began with the landmark economic reforms of 1991 and led to liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation. This shift is considered the trigger for high economic growth rates, the rise of India's IT and services sectors, substantial poverty reduction, the transition from an agrarian economy to a services-dominated economic model, and an expanding middle class. Even if challenges such as income inequality and infrastructure deficits persist, the dynamism of the Indian economy is remarkable (European Commission, 2024).

On its multi-alignment strategy, India has evolved from a leader of non-alignment during the Cold War to a supporter of multi-alignment in recent decades. The emergence of poles of power in the international world order (China, India, Japan, Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the European Union - EU) and the end of the "unipolar moment" of the US (as coined by Krauthammer in 1990) have influenced the current matrix of partnership, cooperation, and rivalry relations (Raghavan, 2017).

India's strategic multi-alignment is defined by fostering strong and simultaneous relationships with countries such as Russia, the US, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Iran (Manning & Chowdhary, 2024), and also China, which is the largest trading partner of India (Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Following the goals of economic, energy, health, social, and cultural security, as well as access to technology and resilient supply chains, multi-alignment is considered the most appropriate strategy of modern times. India chooses varying configurations for different purposes, being driven by its own interests and strategic determinations (Dupuy, 2025).

Multi-alignment, rooted in national interest rather than pure ideology, generates both synergy and friction with the US (Shidore, 2026).

Despite strategic constraints (for instance, sanctions imposed by the US, other developed countries, and/or the EU on actors such as Iran and Russia), India has maintained its pragmatic foreign-policy orientation, "with the aim of widening its foreign policy options and choice" (Tourangbam, 2018). It can be remarked that the practice of strategic autonomy, "that gives the flexibility to do what is required for the protection and promotion of India's interest, remains the base" (Tourangbam, 2018). India's evolving foreign policy ("from Nehru's non-alignment to Modi's strategic autonomy") highlights "a deliberate use of specific approaches" to create space within the international order in accordance with its national interests (Zajączkowski & Pulami, 2025).

India seeks greater participation in international relations, meaning it seeks to strengthen its role and position. Reforming major multilateral institutions to play a greater role within them is one way to achieve this goal (Zajączkowski & Pulami, 2025). It is an active global player, and it follows a proactive foreign policy to leave a "greater global footprint", with "an ambition to be a rule-maker, not merely a rule-taker" (Pant, 2019; Pandey & Yadav, 2024).

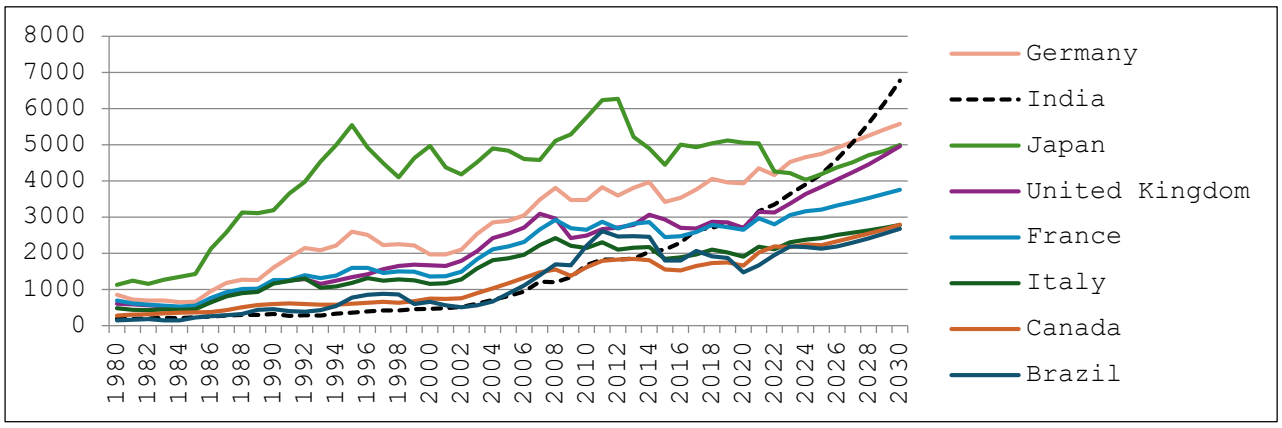
Trump's "America First" Policy has prompted New Delhi to reassess its diplomatic ties with other partners, leading to an emphasis on "multi-alignment". Tensions with the US have already pushed India to pursue fence-mending measures with Beijing, even if the rivalry between India and China will not disappear (Crabtree, 2025). India has used its strengths to capitalise on the "China Plus One" strategy, as multinational firms look to diversify away from China (Jacob, 2026). Russia's role as "a longstanding and time-tested partner" and the "key pillar of India's foreign policy" has been reconfirmed (Pandey & Yadav, 2024).

At the same time, India has shown an inclination towards strengthening ties with developed economies, including the EU (Crabtree, 2025). It is noteworthy that negotiations for the comprehensive EU-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) were concluded in January 2026. Despite protection in specific sensitive sectors, this trade deal is a diversification driver for both India and the EU. Strategic partners since 2004, the EU and India have reached consensus on the chapters covered by their trade agreement after almost two decades. Negotiations for an FTA began in 2007 but were suspended in 2013 over disagreements on market access, particularly in agriculture, automobiles, textiles, and pharmaceuticals. The EU already has the world's most extensive network of trade agreements, covering around 75 partners and over €2 trillion in trade, but diversifying away from the US is no easy task, given the tremendous volume of transatlantic trade in goods and services. It should be noted that on May 6, 2025, India concluded an FTA with the United Kingdom, with the British government describing the pact as the largest and most important bilateral trade agreement the UK has concluded since leaving the EU, while the Indian Prime Minister called the agreement "historic". Concurrently, US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed in February 2025 to conclude a bilateral trade agreement by the fall of 2025 and to double the value of bilateral trade to $500 billion by 2030, however at present the US-India pact negotiations remain stalled (Krishnan, 2025; Kumar, 2025; Schipani et al., 2025; Sala, 2025; Nardelli, 2025; Elliott, 2025).

4. How Powerful is India?

By 2028, forecasts indicate that India will be the third-largest economy after the US and China, with a GDP of $6.8 trillion at current prices (Perez-Goropze et al., 2024; IMF, 2025). Among its strengths are a large and highly qualified young workforce with good English language skills and relatively low costs; Efficient IT services; Remittances from the diaspora and exports of goods and services, which positively contribute to the current account balance; Low external debt and adequate foreign exchange reserves (Perez-Goropze et al., 2024; Coface n.d.). The following chart shows India's GDP evolution compared with the countries ranked 3rd to 10th in the world hierarchy (Chart 1). Already surpassing the United Kingdom and Japan, and even Germany in the near future, India is an economic powerhouse, as reflected by the GDP in current prices. At the same time, India records the highest GDP growth rates among the major economies at present, including China (Chart 2).

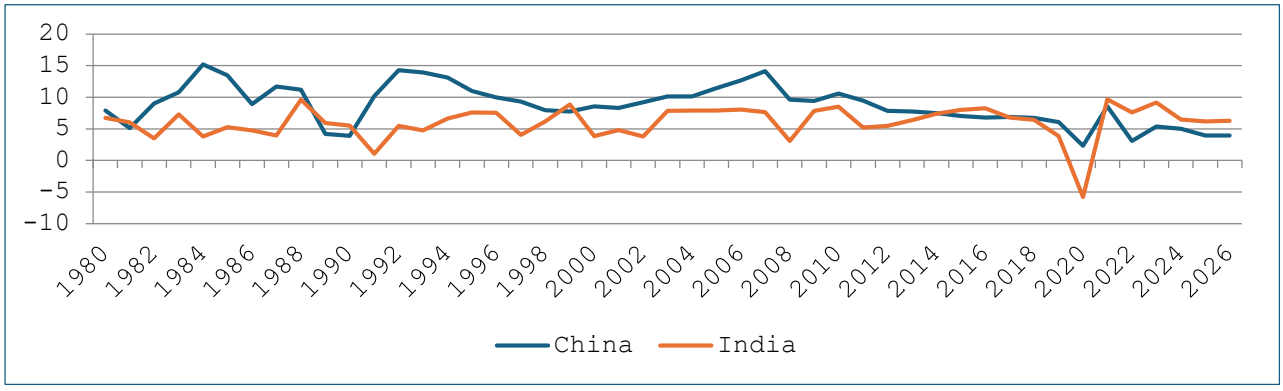
Chart 1: The Evolution of GDP in Current Prices between 1980 and 2030 (billion USD)



Source: Author's representation based on IMF (2025).

Note: Estimates for 2025, forecasts for 2026-2030.

Chart 2: GDP growth rates for India and China between 1980 and 2026 (%)



Source: Author's representation based on IMF (2025).

Note: Forecast for 2026.

According to the World Bank, India's growth rate averaged 6.3% between 2000 and 2024, and "its past achievements provide the foundation for its future ambitions". The international experts underscore that, to maintain its high growth rates and attain an average growth rate of 7.8 percent (in real terms), necessary over the next two decades to achieve the developed country status, there are needed four critical areas for policy action: attracting more investment; generate more and better jobs; promoting structural transformation, increasing participation in global value chains, and increasing the technology adoption; supporting a differentiated policy approach, taking into consideration the need of less developed states (focus on strengthening the fundamentals of growth such as health, education, infrastructure, etc.), as well as those of more developed states (a better business environment, deeper participation in global value chains, etc.) (The World Bank Group, 2025).

In this regard, the various initiatives adopted since 2014 under the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi have underpinned the robust growth (Make in India; Production Linked Incentive PLI, SAMARTH Udyog: Smart Manufacturing, National Policy on Electronics NPE: The Silicon Ambition, Modified Industrial Infrastructure Scheme, Emergency Credit Line for SMEs,

Cluster Development Programme, National Capital Goods Policy, Startup India for Manufacturing, National Logistics Policy).

5. India's Priorities as the Chair of the BRICS in 2026

As BRICS Chair, India has proposed the theme "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability". This focuses on inclusive growth and global cooperation, resonating with the key goals of the Global South.

According to Jacob (2026), the 2026 BRICS presidency provides India "with a unique set of geopolitical levers, should it decide to instrumentalise them". First is the priority of "restraining China" by focusing on "consensus-based expansion and local currency trade". The year 2025 marked 75 years since India and China established diplomatic relations. After ups and downs, the clashes in June 2020 at Galwan on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) effectively froze bilateral relations. The announcement of a border agreement in October 2024 set the stage for normalising bilateral relations. Since then, a series of important steps has been taken to ease tensions between China and India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin from August 31 to September 1, 2025, should be seen as the culmination of India and China's efforts to restore relations after a tense period. At the meeting in Tianjin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping described their countries as development partners rather than competitors. However, several challenges remain. India faces a significant trade deficit with China (around $100 billion in goods trade in 2024). Another important issue is China's close relationship with Pakistan. In May 2025, China also stopped exporting essential fertilisers to India during the crucial summer sowing season. It also restricted exports of rare earth magnets (used in electric-vehicle manufacturing). Experts at Chatham House point out that, in the short term, bilateral relations will likely continue to improve. India knows it cannot fulfil its economic development aspirations without cooperation with China, one of its main trading partners. At the same time, tensions between India and the US, generated by the 50% tariffs imposed by the Trump administration, despite the subsequent reduction, are accelerating India's rapprochement with China. However, both China and India are extremely sensitive to any threat to their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The animosity between the two strategic partners extends beyond the unresolved territorial dispute. Both countries are concerned about the other's presence on their periphery, whether it is Beijing's relationship with Pakistan or India's first joint naval exercise with the Philippines in August 2025 (Impact and Policy Research Institute, 2025; Chatham House, 2025; Roche, 2025b).

Closely related to this priority is the objective of avoiding isolating Russia on the international stage, so it does not move closer to China (Jacob, 2026).

Third, India can send a clear message to the US about its role in the Indo-Pacific. India can be a major defence partner for the US, even if it is difficult now to reach the same level of partnership outlined in the US National Security Strategy during President Donald Trump's first mandate. That version indicated the following: "We welcome India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner. We will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India"; "We will expand our defence and security cooperation with India, a Major Defence Partner of the United States, and support India's growing relationships throughout the region"; "We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region" (The White House, 2017).

Fourth, India can pursue Global South Leadership. India is undeniably one of the leading voices of the Global South, consolidating its influence in Africa and Asia. India championed the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member of the Group of 20, underscoring its role as a voice for developing countries. However, its trade and investment ties with these countries are far behind China's investment-led diplomacy manifested through its New Silk Roads (Rossow, 2025).

6. Conclusions

The key novelty of this research resides in associating a keyword for Indian foreign policy at present, namely multi-alignment, in the context of the pre-eminence of the Global South on the international stage. India also pursues strategic autonomy, i.e., the freedom to make independent decisions to safeguard its national interests.

India, together with China, is one of the most important actors in the Indo-Pacific. The US needs both India and China, even if it has distanced itself from them. However, the US is much closer to India than to China.

US President Donald Trump doubled customs duties on imports from India to 50%, a measure that took effect on August 27, 2025, severely affecting relations between the two strategic partners. A punitive 25% tariff, imposed due to India's purchases of Russian oil, was added to the previous 25% tariff. In the mass media, it is underscored that, until recently, Washington had not raised any objections to other countries' purchases of crude oil from the Russian Federation, not even to China, an even more important buyer of Russian crude oil than India. President Donald Trump's actions in 2025, despite the reduction of trade tariffs in February 2026, have dealt a severe blow to successive US administrations' efforts to build a strong relationship with India.

Even if the temporary tariff wall raised by the US encouraged India and China to come closer, the Asian neighbours will remain both partners and rivals, perhaps more rivals than partners. Given the previous tensions and unresolved issues, as well as specific geostrategic ambitions, India is expected to be cautious in recalibrating its relations with China.

In the context of fierce competition not only between global players but also between North-North, North-South, and even South-South, India aims to expand its partnerships to secure supplies of natural resources, especially critical minerals; enhance regional connectivity; facilitate trade; promote financial and digital integration; and secure support for its growing international role. The grand strategy of multi-alignment supports India's endeavours by balancing shared interests while pursuing national interests, as the right way to achieve its global and regional goals.

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