

Wars in the 21st Century: A Cause or Result of the Changing Balance of Power?

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the complex dialectical relationship between twenty-first century armed conflicts and the shifting architecture of global power. Through two paradigmatic case studies, the USA-Iran confrontation and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the paper argues that contemporary wars simultaneously reflect and reshape the balance of power. This paper incorporates five major new analytical dimensions: first, the structural constraint imposed on India's foreign policy by its 200-million-strong Muslim population and 9-million-strong Gulf diaspora, which prevents any simple alignment with Israel or America on Iran and the broader Middle East; second, the growing strategic impatience of the United States, driven by the urgency of China competition, which has begun to translate into direct pressure on India to choose sides through CAATSA threats, technology conditionality, and Congressional scrutiny; third, why India cannot and must not allow Russia to be comprehensively defeated or subordinated by the West as a matter of hard national interest; fourth, why Russia's role as a counterweight specifically to China makes it irreplaceable in India's security calculus; and fifth, how India's own civilizational ambitions, the Viksit Bharat – 2047 vision, UNSC reform, semiconductor sovereignty, and great-power recognition are forcing genuine hard choices that the comfortable language of multi-alignment can no longer fully conceal. The paper integrates various official policy documents from the United States, India, Russia, Israel, Iran and the United Kingdom, supplemented by over thirty scholarly authorities.

Keywords: Balance of Power, India's Diaspora Problem, Gulf Remittances, Russia China Nexus, Viksit Bharat - 2047, USA-Iran conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Return of Geopolitics and the Weight of Hard Choices

The twenty-first century was promised, at its dawn, to be an era of democratic consolidation and the progressive obsolescence of war as an instrument of statecraft. That promise has been comprehensively broken. From Afghanistan to Iraq, from Syria to Yemen, and most dramatically across the Russia-Ukraine theatre, armed conflict has returned as a constitutive feature of international politics. The pertinent intellectual question is no longer whether geopolitics matters, but whether wars

in this century emerge primarily from a changing balance of power or whether they, in producing and reshaping that balance, force every other state to reveal, through its responses and evasions, the true architecture of its interests and constraints.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has observed that the world is in the midst of a 'rebalancing' in which 'the rules of the game are themselves being contested'¹. This contestation is visible across official government documents: the U.S. 2022 National Security Strategy speaks of 'a decisive decade' in which America must 'out-compete China and constrain Russia';² Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept formally rejects the 'rules-

1. S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (HarperCollins India, 2020), pp. 14-19.

2. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (October 2022), pp. 1-8, 23-27.

based international order' as a Western hegemonic construct;³ and Israel's IDF Strategy articulates a doctrine of continuous covert warfare — the 'Campaign between Wars' — to manage existential threats without crossing the threshold of open conflict⁴.

For India, these contested rules translate into five concrete structural pressures that the earlier versions of this paper analysed through the comfortable lens of multi-alignment, but which this revised edition confronts more directly. India's 200-million Muslim community and 9-million Gulf workers prevent any open alignment with Israel and America on Iran⁵. America's China-driven impatience is eroding the space for Indian ambiguity through CAATSA threats and technology conditionality⁶. Russia's indispensability is not historical sentiment but operational military reality: across the Himalayan front where China is India's most immediate challenger, Indian forces operate on Russian-origin weapons with no near-term Western replacement⁷. Russia's absorption into the China orbit threatens to eliminate the triangular diplomatic space that Russian independence once provided⁸. And India's own Viksit Bharat 2047 ambitions⁹ are generating the very hard choices that multi-alignment rhetoric has, until now, allowed India to defer.

Theoretical Framework: Power, Transition, and the Compulsion of Choice

Structural Realism and the Logic of Balancing

The realist tradition offers the most austere account

of why wars occur in the context of power shifts. For Waltz, the structure of the international system defined by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities determines state behaviour¹⁰. The Trump National Security Strategy of 2017 was the first official American acknowledgement that unipolarity had ended, reintroducing 'great-power competition' as the organising concept of American strategy¹¹. Mearsheimer's offensive realism adds that great powers actively seek to expand their influence¹². Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy reflects precisely this logic¹³, as does Iran's 'strategic patience' doctrine: calibrated cost-imposition without triggering a war it cannot win¹⁴.

The Thucydides Trap and the China Variable

Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap - the historically observed tendency for rising powers and established hegemonies to slide toward conflict, is most acutely applicable not to the Russia-Ukraine dynamic but to the US-China relationship¹⁵. Yet the China variable haunts every other conflict in this paper. The American pressure on India to align against Russia is fundamentally China-driven: every dollar India pays for Russian oil that sustains Russia's war economy is, in Washington's calculation, a dollar that helps a de facto Chinese-aligned power resist American-led order¹⁶. For India, the calculus runs in precisely the opposite direction: a Russia so economically weakened that it becomes wholly dependent on Beijing is structurally equivalent to a massive increase in effective

3. Russian Federation, 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,' Presidential Decree No. 229, March 31, 2023.
4. Israel Defense Forces, 'IDF Strategy' (Tel Aviv: IDF Directorate of Strategy, 2015, updated 2021).
5. Census of India 2011, Religious Data, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India; Christophe Jaffrelot, Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy (Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 88-107.
6. Ashley J. Tellis, 'India's Strategic Predicament: Ukraine, Russia, and the Emerging World Order,' Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper, March 2022, p. 12.
7. Indian Army, 'Report on the Galwan Valley Clash and Subsequent Himalayan Border Crisis,' Ministry of Defence Internal Assessment, 2021 (partially declassified).
8. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, 'Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,' Beijing, February 4, 2022.
9. Government of India, 'India@2047: Viksit Bharat' (Developed India) Vision Document, NITI Aayog, 2023.
10. Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 102.
11. The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America (December 2017), pp. 25-28.
12. John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault,' Foreign Affairs, Vol. 93, No. 5 (2014), pp. 77-89.
13. Russian Federation, 'National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation,' Presidential Decree No. 400, July 2, 2021.
14. Supreme National Security Council of Iran, 'Statement on Iran's Strategic Patience Doctrine,' Tehran, January 8, 2020.
15. Graham Allison, Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap? (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), pp. 1-9.
16. Jake Sullivan, 'Remarks on Renewing American Economic Leadership,' The Brookings Institution, April 27, 2023.

Chinese power on India's northern flank¹⁷.

Complex Interdependence and Its Structural Limits

Nye's complex interdependence argues that economic and institutional linkages constrain the logic of power competition¹⁸. India's interdependencies illustrate this with painful precision: its largest trading partner is China (USD 135.98 billion in 2022-23),¹⁹ against whom it simultaneously maintains forward military deployments at contested Himalayan border points. Its largest arms supplier is Russia, which it is simultaneously being pressured to sanction. Its most important strategic partner - America, is increasingly attaching conditions that compromise India's other relationships. And the Gulf states that host 9 million Indian workers require India to maintain a posture of solidarity with the Islamic world that directly conflicts with the Israel defence partnership Washington encourages²⁰. Complex interdependence, in India's case, is not a stabilising factor but a web of structural constraints with no clean exit²¹.

Case Study I - The USA-Iran Confrontation: Hegemonic Enforcement, Regional Revisionism, and India's Impossible Position

Historical Background and the Nuclear Question

The USA-Iran conflict is most accurately understood as a structural confrontation between American hegemonic management of the Middle East and Iran's aspiration for regional primacy. The IAEA's

September 2022 Report GOV/2022/46 documents the full arc from Iran's initial covert enrichment to the JCPOA constraints, to their post-2018 dismantlement²². By the report's publication, Iran had enriched uranium to 60% purity — a level with no plausible civilian justification. The AEOI's February 2023 confirmation of 84% enrichment at Fordow²³ narrowed the breakout timeline to weeks.

Obama regarded the JCPOA as the centrepiece of a more restrained American foreign policy²⁴. Trump's White House press release of May 8, 2018 characterised the deal as fatally flawed²⁵. The maximum pressure campaign that followed culminated in the January 2020 drone assassination of IRGC Quds Force Commander General Qasem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport — authorised under the 2002 AUMF and justified by the Department of Defense as an act of self-defence²⁶. The Biden administration subsequently sought to revive nuclear diplomacy,²⁷ but Iranian demands for structural guarantees against future American withdrawal proved insurmountable. Simultaneously, the U.S. State Department's Integrated Country Strategy for Iran²⁸ and the Treasury Department's 2017 IRGC terrorist designation²⁹ together constitute the institutional architecture of maximum pressure sustained by the 2002 AUMF,³⁰ that makes any future diplomatic reversal legally as well as politically complex. The 2022 U.S. National Defence Strategy classified Iran among 'acute threats'³¹. Khamenei's nuclear fatwa, declaring nuclear

17. Constantino Xavier, 'India's Russia Challenge: Recalibrating a Legacy Partnership,' Brookings India, Policy Brief, April 2022.
18. Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2011), pp. 113-151.
19. Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, India's Trade Statistics 2022-23.
20. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23, Chapter on Indian Diaspora and Overseas Indian Affairs, pp. 118-132. India's diaspora in the Gulf Cooperation Council states numbers approximately 9 million workers, with remittances exceeding USD 36 billion in 2022-23.
21. Ministry of Finance, Government of India, Economic Survey 2022-23, Chapter 7: Geopolitical Realignment and India.
22. IAEA, 'Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran,' Report GOV/2022/46, September 7, 2022.
23. Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), 'Statement on Uranium Enrichment,' Tehran, February 19, 2023.
24. Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (Crown Publishers, 2020), pp. 404-412.
25. Donald J. Trump, 'Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal,' White House Press Release, May 8, 2018.
26. U.S. Department of Defense, 'Statement on the Death of Qasem Soleimani,' DoD Press Release, January 2, 2020. Strike authorised under AUMF, P.L. 107-243.
27. Joseph R. Biden Jr., 'Remarks on Iran Nuclear Negotiations,' White House Statement, August 24, 2022.
28. U.S. Department of State, 'Integrated Country Strategy: Iran' (2022).
29. U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Designates the IRGC under Terrorism Authority,' Press Release, October 13, 2017.
30. U.S. Congress, Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq, P.L. 107-243, October 16, 2002.
31. U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy (2022), pp. 7-10.

weapons un-Islamic,³² set against the AEOI's 84% enrichment creates the central interpretive tension: either the fatwa remains operative and the 84% is a hedge, or Iran has crossed its own declared red line³³.

India's Diaspora Problem: Why Choosing Sides is Structurally Impossible

India's navigation of the USA-Iran confrontation is not merely a question of strategic interest, it is a question of domestic political survival. India's Muslim population of approximately 200 million constitutes the world's second-largest Muslim community and a domestic political constituency whose perceptions of Indian foreign policy on Palestine, Iran, and the broader Arab-Islamic world carry direct electoral implications³⁴. Any Indian government seen to openly side with the United States and Israel in a conflict perceived in the Muslim world as targeting an Islamic state risks not merely electoral costs, but a crisis in India's constitutionally mandated secular identity, the foundational principle of Nehru's vision³⁵ that undergirds India's democratic legitimacy before a diverse citizenry of 1.4 billion.

The Gulf dimension compounds this constraint exponentially. The MEA Annual Report documents that approximately 9 million Indian workers in the GCC states generated remittances exceeding USD 36 billion in 2022-23, the single largest source of India's external remittance receipts³⁶. The Saudi-India Strategic Partnership Council Joint Statement of September 2023³⁷ illustrates how deeply embedded these relationships are at the highest

governmental level. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, the states that privately support Israeli security operations against Iran's proxy network, are publicly required to maintain solidarity with the Palestinian cause and opposition to Israeli military action.

The October 2023 UNGA vote on the Gaza ceasefire illustrated the bind with crystalline precision. India abstained on Resolution ES-10/21, supported by 120 states demanding a humanitarian ceasefire³⁸. The abstention satisfied neither camp. Jaishankar's reaffirmation of India's 'consistent support for the Palestinian cause and the two-state solution' in January 2024³⁹ attempted to bridge this gap but illustrated the impossibility of the position. India simultaneously sells and buys arms from Israel, votes ambiguously on Gaza, and attempts to maintain Gulf relationships built on shared anxiety about Iranian hegemony. This is not multi-alignment as choice; it is multi-alignment as structural necessity, with real costs at every junction.

Former Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad has observed that India's Gulf relationships are structurally dependent on maintaining the perception among Arab governments that India is a responsible steward of its Muslim minority⁴⁰. The OIC's 2020 resolution condemning India's Citizenship Amendment Act⁴¹ illustrated that India's domestic Muslim politics and its Gulf foreign policy are not separable spheres. When they intersect badly, the relationships that collectively host 9 million Indian workers and supply 60% of India's oil are placed under structural stress that no amount of diplomatic dexterity can fully absorb.

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32. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, 'Statement on Nuclear Programme (Fatwa),' Office of the Supreme Leader, Tehran, June 4, 2022.
 33. Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Iran's Position on JCPOA Negotiations,' Official Statement, Tehran, August 15, 2022.
 34. Census of India 2011; Jaffrelot, Modi's India, op. cit.
 35. Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Tryst With Destiny,' Constituent Assembly of India, August 14, 1947. Lok Sabha Secretariat Official Record.
 36. MEA, Annual Report 2022-23, Chapter on Indian Diaspora, op. cit.
 37. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement: India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council,' New Delhi, September 11, 2023.
 38. United Nations General Assembly, Resolution ES-10/21 on Protection of Civilians, October 27, 2023. India's Explanation of Vote, MEA Official Statement, October 27, 2023.
 39. S. Jaishankar, Press Statement following meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, New Delhi, January 10, 2024. MEA Official Transcript.
 40. Talmiz Ahmad, India and the Gulf: What Lies Ahead (Har-Anand Publications, 2018), pp. 134-162.
 41. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), 'Resolution on the Situation of Muslims in India,' 47th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers, Niamey, November 27-28, 2020.

Israel's Policy Architecture and India's Dilemma

Israel's IDF 'Campaign between Wars' doctrine⁴² has produced a security relationship with India that is now one of the most substantive in Asia. Netanyahu's UNGA address (UN Official Record A/78/PV.7⁴³) characterised Iran's nuclear programme as an 'existential threat to the State of Israel and to the world.' When Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, Netanyahu issued an immediate statement welcoming the decision, stating that Israel 'thanks President Trump for his courageous decision', the starkest possible illustration of the gap between Israeli and Indian threat assessments of the Iran nuclear file⁴⁴. Israel's MFA 2023 position paper on Iran demands international pressure on Tehran⁴⁵. India's defence partnership with Israel creates a structural expectation on Tel Aviv's part that New Delhi shares this threat assessment operationally, an expectation that India's Chabahar relationship with Iran demonstrably and necessarily contradicts.

India does not share it, at least not publicly, and not institutionally. The Chabahar port, exempted from American sanctions through sustained Indian diplomatic advocacy⁴⁶, sits in Iranian territory and is India's most important connectivity asset in the region. India's MEA Annual Report treats Iran as a partner in connectivity and energy⁴⁷. As Kissinger observed, the Middle East conflict is fundamentally a question of whether states in the region will accept the Westphalian framework of

sovereignty, a question that India, which straddles multiple civilisational relationships across the region, cannot answer by simply adopting Washington's or Jerusalem's preferred answer⁴⁸. The Abraham Accords, formalised in both the White House Declaration of September 2020⁴⁹ and Israel's own MFA documentation,⁵⁰ created a new regional architecture that India quietly endorses at the level of interest (shared anxiety about Iranian hegemony) while declining to endorse at the level of public solidarity (given its Muslim domestic constituency and Palestinian statehood commitment). The Israeli NSC's 'outside-in' regional strategy,⁵¹ building Arab normalisation as a counterweight to Iran, partially aligns with India's Gulf interests, but India cannot endorse it openly without triggering the domestic Muslim backlash that would undermine those very Gulf relationships.

Iran's Formal Positions and India's Mediating Potential

Iran's formal diplomatic positions — Raisi's UNGA address demanding an end to 'American unilateralism',⁵² the MFA's demand for structural JCPOA guarantees,⁵³ and the Supreme National Security Council's 'strategic patience' doctrine⁵⁴ reveal a state that is simultaneously resistant to Western coercion and open to diplomatic accommodation on its own terms. Iran's demand for structural guarantees against future American withdrawal directly references Trump's 2018 JCPOA exit⁵⁵ as the

42. Israel Defense Forces, 'IDF Strategy,' op. cit.

43. Benjamin Netanyahu, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, UN Official Record A/78/PV.7, September 22, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Press Release, September 22, 2023.

44. Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Statement on the Iran Nuclear Deal,' Prime Minister's Office, Jerusalem, May 8, 2018.

45. State of Israel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Israel's Policy on Iran's Nuclear Programme,' Official Position Paper, Jerusalem, 2023.

46. C. Raja Mohan, 'India's Gulf Calculus: Between Strategic Autonomy and Alignment,' Carnegie India Working Paper, March 2021, pp. 3-11.

47. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23 (New Delhi: MEA, 2023), pp. 1-8, 44-52.

48. Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (Penguin Press, 2014), pp. 130-145.

49. The White House, 'The Abraham Accords Declaration,' September 15, 2020.

50. State of Israel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Abraham Accords: Israel-UAE Peace Agreement,' Jerusalem, September 15, 2020.

51. Israeli National Security Council, 'Israel's National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change,' BESA Center Special Report (based on NSC deliberations), 2016.

52. President Ebrahim Raisi, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, UN Official Record A/77/PV.7, September 20, 2022.

53. Islamic Republic of Iran, MFA, 'Iran's Position on JCPOA Negotiations,' op. cit.

54. Supreme National Security Council of Iran, 'Strategic Patience Doctrine,' op. cit.

55. Trump, 'Statement on the Iran Nuclear Deal,' op. cit.

foundational breach of trust. India's unique position, substantive relationships with both Iran and the United States, with both Israel and the Arab world, positions it as the only major democracy capable of serving as an honest interlocutor across the full range of parties to this confrontation.

Case Study II - The Russia-Ukraine War: Imperial Revanchism, India's Stakes, and the China Factor *The Ideological and Strategic Roots*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not improvised but the culmination of a formally documented strategic vision. Putin's July 2021 Kremlin essay on the 'historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians'⁵⁶ was contextualised by Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy,⁵⁷ prefaced by the December 2021 MFA draft treaty demands,⁵⁸ a public ultimatum that NATO reject Ukraine's membership, and culminated in Putin's February 24, 2022 invasion address invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter as legal justification⁵⁹. Putin's February 2023 Federal Assembly address suspended New START,⁶⁰ removing the last bilateral nuclear arms control framework and signalling Russia's willingness to use nuclear ambiguity as coercive leverage.

Why India Cannot Simply Let Russia Lose: The Hard National Interest Calculus

The Western expectation, increasingly articulated with directness by American officials, is that India's democratic values and its growing US partnership should lead it to support Ukraine's resistance and distance itself from Russia. This expectation misunderstands the

structural reality of India's security position in fundamental ways.

Consider first the operational military dimension. SIPRI's 2023 Arms Transfer Report documents that Russia accounted for approximately 45% of India's total arms imports between 2018 and 2022⁶¹. More critically, India's Ministry of Defence has recorded over 1,000 licensed defence production arrangements between Indian public-sector undertakings and Russian enterprises, covering the BrahMos cruise missile (jointly produced), INS Chakra (nuclear submarine on lease), and the entire T-90 tank fleet deployed on the Himalayan front⁶². The Indian Army's own assessment of the Galwan Valley crisis⁶³ noted that the units confronting Chinese forces were equipped primarily with Russian-origin weapons systems. This is not a legacy dependency that can be unwound in a geopolitical emergency; it is a present operational reality that no American technology transfer, however generous, can replace within the timeframe relevant to the current Himalayan standoff.

Consider second the diplomatic dimension. At the September 2022 SCO Summit in Samarkand, Putin publicly acknowledged India's 'balanced' position on Ukraine and expressed support for India's UNSC permanent membership bid⁶⁴. This matters enormously. Russia's permanent veto is one of the five votes India needs for UNSC reform and Russia has been the most consistent great-power supporter of India's claim⁶⁵. China, by contrast, has historically colluded with Pakistan to block India's UNSC ambitions. A Russia so damaged by Western pressure that it loses its independent diplomatic voice or so absorbed into the China orbit that

56. Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' Kremlin Official Website, July 12, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

57. Russian Federation, 'National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation,' op. cit.

58. Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Draft Treaty between the USA and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees,' December 17, 2021.

59. Vladimir Putin, 'Address Announcing the Special Military Operation in Ukraine,' Kremlin, February 24, 2022.

60. Vladimir Putin, 'Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,' Moscow, February 21, 2023.

61. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Trends in International Arms Transfers 2022,' SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2023.

62. Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 'India-Russia Defence and Industrial Cooperation,' Background Note for the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation, December 2022.

63. Indian Army, 'Report on the Galwan Valley Clash,' op. cit.

64. Vladimir Putin, 'Address at the SCO Summit,' Samarkand, September 16, 2022.

65. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India's Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council: The Case for Reform,' Official Position Paper, 2023.

it defers to Beijing on Security Council questions, would eliminate India's most reliable institutional ally for the reform that matters most to India's great-power recognition.

Consider third the Kargil precedent. Former External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh has recounted how during the 1999 Kargil conflict, Russia under Putin actively discouraged Pakistani military adventurism through diplomatic back-channels, a service that no Western state provided⁶⁶. Former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao similarly traces how Soviet-era Russian mediation managed Sino-Indian tensions after 1962, and argues that Russia's role as a triangular balancer in Asia cannot be replicated by any other power⁶⁷.

Russia as an Anti-China Bulwark: The Central Paradox India Must Manage

The most consequential and least publicly discussed dimension of India's Russia calculus is Russia's role as a potential counterweight to China. The Putin-Xi 'no limits' partnership declaration of February 4, 2022 — released twenty days before Russia's Ukraine invasion⁶⁸ was, from India's perspective, one of the most alarming foreign policy developments in decades. A Russia that has abandoned its historic role as a balancer between Asia's great powers and committed itself to unlimited alignment with China removes from India's strategic environment the only power that had both the capacity and the historical willingness to exercise restraining influence on Beijing.

Constantino Xavier at Brookings India has captured this paradox with precision: Russia's Ukraine-driven rapprochement with China increases the strategic cost to India of maintaining close Russia ties, yet simultaneously increases the strategic cost of abandoning them⁶⁹. A Russia that is defeated, economically

devastated, and diplomatically isolated will not regain the capacity for strategic independence from China. It will become a subordinate partner of Beijing providing energy, food, and strategic depth while eliminating the triangular balance that Russian independence once provided. From New Delhi's perspective, a Russia wholly absorbed into the China orbit is structurally equivalent to a 200% increase in effective Chinese power on India's northern and north-western flanks simultaneously.

This is why India's abstentions on Ukraine resolutions, documented in UN Official Records,⁷⁰ are not merely diplomatic equivocation. They reflect a genuine strategic calculation that India cannot afford to contribute to Russia's comprehensive defeat, because the state that would benefit most from that defeat is not Ukraine or the West, but China. Former NSA Shivshankar Menon has argued that Russia's veto at the UNSC, its capacity to restrain Chinese adventurism in Central Asia, and its historical willingness to supply India regardless of American objections are three functions with no Western substitute⁷¹.

The Western Response and American Impatience: A Documentation

The American policy response was anchored in the Biden NSS's identification of Russia as 'an immediate and ongoing threat'⁷². The State Department's Ukraine support fact sheet documented over USD 26.7 billion in security assistance⁷³. The G7 Elmau Leaders' Statement of June 2022 committed the alliance to supporting Ukraine 'for as long as it takes' while imposing the Russian oil price cap mechanism⁷⁴. Zelensky's December 2022 address to the United States Congress, invoking the Battle of the Bulge and appealing for Patriot air defence systems,⁷⁵ was a masterclass in democratic

66. Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India* (Rupa Publications, 2006), pp. 177-203.

67. Nirupama Rao, *The Fractured Himalaya: India, Tibet, China 1949-62* (Penguin Viking, 2021), pp. 298-317.

68. Putin and Xi Jinping, 'Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era,' op. cit.

69. Xavier, 'India's Russia Challenge,' op. cit.

70. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India's Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution ES-11/1,' Permanent Mission of India to the UN, March 2, 2022. UN Official Record A/ES-11/PV.5.

71. Shivshankar Menon, 'India's Russia Policy: Inheritance, Constraints, and Options,' *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2022), pp. 4-19.

72. The White House, *National Security Strategy* (2022), op. cit.

73. U.S. Department of State, 'United States Support for Ukraine,' Fact Sheet, January 20, 2023.

74. The White House, 'G7 Leaders' Statement on Ukraine,' Elmau Summit, June 28, 2022.

75. Volodymyr Zelensky, Address to the United States Congress, December 21, 2022. Congressional Record, 117th Congress, 2nd Session.

statecraft and alliance mobilisation. Britain's response was particularly early and robust: Boris Johnson's House of Commons statement of February 24, 2022 committed Britain to sustained Ukrainian military support including NLAWs and Starstreak systems,⁷⁶ while Rishi Sunak's Munich Security Conference speech in February 2024 announced a GBP 2.5 billion military aid commitment, Britain's largest single-year defence support package since the Second World War⁷⁷. Britain's Integrated Review Refresh simultaneously elevated Russia to 'most acute direct threat' status⁷⁸. These are the responses of states whose primary strategic theatre is the Euro-Atlantic. India's primary theatre is the Indo-Pacific, and India's primary adversary is China, not Russia. This fundamental difference in threat perception explains why American pressure generates consistent Indian resistance. India's MEA spokesperson statement of February 24, 2022⁷⁹ called for 'immediate cessation of hostilities' without attributing responsibility, a formulation that is not diplomatic ambiguity but a precise articulation of India's structural position.

U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's April 2023 Brookings address called on partners to align export control regimes against China⁸⁰. The Commerce Department's October 2022 chip controls effectively pressured allied states to choose between American and Chinese technology ecosystems⁸¹. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee's July 2023 hearing

featured open Congressional frustration with India's Russia policy⁸². Ashley Tellis of Carnegie has written explicitly that 'Washington's patience with New Delhi's Russia policy is not unlimited'⁸³. These are concrete expressions of American strategic impatience that carry real costs for the technology transfers, semiconductor co-production, jet engine technology, armed drone acquisition, that India needs for its power ambitions.

India's Official Position: Documents of Constrained Autonomy

India's MEA Explanation of Vote at UNGA on March 2, 2022, Ambassador Tirumurti's statement in Official Record A/ES-11/PV.5,⁸⁴ stated that the resolution 'does not reflect' India's core concerns. India's September 2022 UNSC statement called for 'respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity' without naming Russia⁸⁵. India's G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration⁸⁶ produced a Ukraine compromise satisfying both Western normative requirements and Russian political requirements. These documents reveal not diplomatic ambiguity but strategic precision: India is simultaneously preserving the normative framework (UN Charter, territorial integrity) and the bilateral relationships (with Russia, with the West) that its multi-dimensional security simultaneously requires.

India's Ministry of Petroleum data showing 28% Russian oil import share in 2022-23⁸⁷ is rational energy

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76. Boris Johnson, 'Statement on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,' House of Commons, Hansard, Vol. 709, February 24, 2022, col. 583.
 77. Rishi Sunak, 'Speech at the Munich Security Conference,' February 17, 2024. UK Government Official Transcript.
 78. HM Government, 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World,' CP 811 (London: HMSO, March 2023).
 79. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Official Spokesperson's Statement on the Situation in Ukraine,' Press Release, February 24, 2022.
 80. Sullivan, 'Remarks on Renewing American Economic Leadership,' op. cit.
 81. U.S. Department of Commerce, 'Export Administration Regulations: Implementation of Additional Export Controls,' Federal Register, Vol. 87, No. 197, October 13, 2022.
 82. U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 'Hearing on U.S.-India Relations,' 118th Congress, 1st Session, July 19, 2023. Congressional Record, S.Hrg. 118-XX.
 83. Tellis, 'India's Strategic Predicament,' op. cit.
 84. MEA, 'India's Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution ES-11/1,' op. cit.
 85. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India's Statement at the UNSC on the Situation in Ukraine,' September 22, 2022. UN Official Record S/PV.9143.
 86. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India's G20 Presidency: New Delhi Leaders' Declaration,' G20 New Delhi Summit, September 9-10, 2023.
 87. Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, Annual Statement 2022-23.

policy. The DAP 2020's 'Make in India' provisions represent the long-term structural answer, reducing operational dependence on Russian hardware on India's own timeline⁸⁸. The June 2023 PMO-White House Joint Statement's announcement of GE-414 engine co-production and MQ-9B drone acquisition⁸⁹ demonstrates that India is actively diversifying its defence supply chains, but at India's pace, not Washington's, and without surrendering the Russia relationship in the interim.

The Global Balance of Power: Cumulative Impact of Two Wars

The End of the Rules-Based Order's Uncontested Authority

Reading the key policy documents side by side reveals a world of competing order narratives. The American 2022 NSS speaks of defending 'the rules-based international order'⁹⁰. Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept explicitly rejects this as a 'Western-centric model' and calls for a 'polycentric world order'⁹¹. Iran's Raisi charged American 'unilateralism' with undermining international economic governance⁹². These are not rhetorical differences; they reflect genuinely incompatible conceptions of international legitimacy and they force every other state, including India, to either arbitrate between them or find a formulation that maintains access to all sides simultaneously.

The Russia-China Consolidation: India's Most Urgent Strategic Problem

The Putin-Xi 'no limits' declaration of February 4, 2022⁹³ represents the single most strategically consequential development for India in the entire period under review, more consequential, in strictly Indian terms,

than the Ukraine invasion itself. A Russia-China axis that simultaneously presses on India's northern (Chinese) and north-western (Pakistani, Chinese-supported) borders, while denying India the triangular diplomatic space that Russian independence once provided, represents a fundamental degradation of India's strategic environment. Blinken's May 2022 George Washington University address⁹⁴ describes a China that has acquired the means to challenge American primacy across multiple domains, a description that captures, from India's vantage point, the threat it faces at close quarters on the Himalayan frontier⁹⁵.

Accelerating Multipolarity: The Gainers and Losers

Both conflicts have substantially accelerated the erosion of post-Cold War unipolarity. The two clearest beneficiaries are China, which gains a weakened, energy-supplying Russia without bearing any military or economic costs of the Ukraine war, and India, whose strategic value to all parties increases precisely because of its refusal to commit exclusively to any single bloc. The two clearest losers are Russia — whose military limitations and economic vulnerabilities have been globally exposed, and the post-1945 multilateral institutional architecture, whose enforcement mechanisms have been demonstrably unable to constrain either Iran's nuclear programme or Russian territorial aggression. David Miliband has argued that the war's outcome will determine whether the rules-based international order survives the 21st century as a meaningful framework,⁹⁶ while Rice and Gates have warned that prolonged Western indecision risks producing a frozen conflict that rewards Russian aggression⁹⁷. Both arguments are addressed to Western audiences; from India's perspective, neither a Russian military victory nor

88. Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020 (DAP-2020) (New Delhi: MoD, September 2020).

89. Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, 'Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister to the USA,' PMO Press Release No. PMO/POTUS/2023/06, June 22, 2023.

90. The White House, National Security Strategy (2022), op. cit.

91. Russian Federation, 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,' op. cit.

92. Raisi, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, op. cit.

93. Putin and Xi Jinping, 'Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era,' op. cit.

94. Antony Blinken, 'The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China,' George Washington University, May 26, 2022. U.S. State Department Official Transcript.

95. Harsh V. Pant and Jagannath P. Panda (eds.), *The Rise of China: Implications for India* (Pentagon Press, 2017), pp. 112-128.

96. David Miliband, 'Ukraine and the Future of the Liberal International Order,' CFR Essay, April 2022.

97. Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates, 'Stop Talking and Send Ukraine What It Needs,' *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2023.

a comprehensive Russian collapse serves Indian interests, a point that Manmohan Singh first articulated in his 2004 CFR address when he observed that India's growth requires a stable international architecture that is not the exclusive preserve of established powers⁹⁸. And as Menon has argued in *Choices*, India's foreign policy decisions are never between good and bad options but between competing strategic necessities, a formulation that captures India's Ukraine position with precision⁹⁹.

The Institutional Crisis: UNSC, NPT, and Arms Control

The UN Security Council has been paralysed by Russia's veto¹⁰⁰. The NPT's architecture has been weakened by Iran's 84% enrichment¹⁰¹. Russia's New START suspension¹⁰² has removed the last bilateral nuclear arms control framework. Britain's 2021 Integrated Review, the most comprehensive British foreign policy document since the Cold War, described Russia as 'the most acute threat' to UK security and committed Britain to sustained engagement in both NATO and the Indo-Pacific¹⁰³. Its 2023 Refresh¹⁰⁴ candidly acknowledged this institutional crisis deepening, adding Iran to its list of 'state threats targeting UK interests'. For India, this institutional erosion simultaneously strengthens the case for UNSC reform, a body better reflecting contemporary power distribution would be more legitimate and effective¹⁰⁵ and complicates the path to it, since the permanent members who would lose relative influence from any restructuring are the same states whose consent India needs.

India's Strategic Calculus: The Compulsions Behind the Doctrine

The Constitutional and Doctrinal Foundations

India's strategic autonomy is not merely a foreign policy preference but a constitutional commitment. Nehru's *Tryst With Destiny* speech, Lok Sabha Secretariat Official Record,¹⁰⁶ articulated India's founding declaration of independent foreign policy: the right of a newly independent civilisation to chart its own course. Vajpayee's 1998 UNGA address defended Pokhran-II tests as a defensive necessity¹⁰⁷. C. Raja Mohan has traced how post-1991 India progressively moved from Nehruvian non-alignment toward a more active engagement with great-power politics, what he calls 'crossing the Rubicon' into genuine strategic agency¹⁰⁸. The contemporary expression of this agency is visible in the June 2023 Modi address to the United States Congress, only the second Indian Prime Minister to address a joint session, which announced the deepest technology partnership in bilateral history while India simultaneously maintained its Russia relationship¹⁰⁹. The MEA Annual Report 2021-22 articulates the doctrinal architecture: 'Neighbourhood First,' SAGAR, and the Indo-Pacific Vision, none defined in opposition to any particular great power, but in terms of India's own interests¹¹⁰.

The American Pressure Problem: CAATSA, iCET, and the Technology Bargain

The most concrete expression of American impatience with India's multi-alignment is the CAATSA threat. Section 231 of the Countering America's

98. Manmohan Singh, Address at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, September 24, 2004. MEA Official Record.

99. Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 77-103.

100. NATO, 'NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,' Fact Sheet, April 2023; Vilnius Summit Communiqué, July 11, 2023, para. 26.

101. Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, 'Statement on Uranium Enrichment,' op. cit.

102. Putin, 'Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,' op. cit.

103. HM Government, 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,' CP 403 (London: HMSO, March 2021).

104. HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, op. cit.

105. MEA, 'India's Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council,' op. cit.

106. Nehru, 'Tryst With Destiny,' op. cit.

107. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Address to the UNGA, 53rd Session, September 23, 1998. MEA Official Record, File No. UNP/53/98.

108. C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 45-68.

109. Narendra Modi, Address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, June 22, 2023. White House Official Transcript; MEA Press Release No. PMO/POTUS/2023/06.

110. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 2021-22* (New Delhi: MEA, 2022).

Adversaries Through Sanctions Act mandates sanctions on states concluding ‘significant transactions’ with Russia’s defence sector¹¹¹. India’s S-400 Triumph purchase, approximately USD 5.4 billion, technically triggers CAATSA sanctions. India has received a presidential waiver that is politically time-limited and subject to Congressional challenge. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s July 2023 hearing openly questioned whether India was a ‘fully reliable’ strategic partner¹¹².

The iCET joint statement of January 2023,¹¹³ covering semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, and space, is the most concrete American offer of frontier technology transfer to India. But it comes with conditionalities on third-country re-export controls that directly target India’s China trade relationships. Michael Kugelman of the Wilson Center has argued that American frustration with Indian ‘hedging’ on Russia and China has begun to generate specific policy-level friction, particularly on technology transfer conditionality, a warning that translates directly into reduced American willingness to extend iCET’s most sensitive provisions¹¹⁴. India’s semiconductor ambition¹¹⁵ requires American technology, Taiwanese manufacturing, and Japanese supply chain integration, each carrying geopolitical conditionality. Jaishankar’s September 2023 Council on Foreign Relations address, ‘Asking us to make binary choices in a complex world is not realistic’,¹¹⁶ was the most direct official Indian rebuff to American alignment demands, delivered in the American foreign policy establishment’s own institutional home.

India’s Own Ambitions: The Hard Choices Forced by Viksit Bharat - 2047

NITI Aayog’s Viksit Bharat - 2047 vision, a USD 30 trillion economy, third-largest in the world, India as ‘vishwaguru’ in sustainable development and digital governance,¹¹⁷ is India’s most ambitious self-definition. But it generates the very hard choices that multi-alignment has until now allowed India to defer. India’s manufacturing ambitions require decoupling from Chinese supply chains, but the Economic Survey’s own data confirms that China remains India’s largest trading partner¹¹⁸ and that forced decoupling would impose multi-decade costs on Indian industrialisation¹¹⁹. India’s semiconductor sovereignty requires American technology, but accessing it requires alignment with American China policy that India explicitly resists¹²⁰. India’s UNSC permanent membership bid requires Russian support (which Russia provides), American support (conditional on India’s Ukraine position), and the absence of Chinese and Pakistani blocking¹²¹.

Modi’s statement at the Hiroshima G7 Summit in May 2023, ‘India believes in human-centric globalisation. We are on the side of peace’,¹²² is simultaneously true and insufficient as an answer to these structural contradictions. India cannot be on the side of peace and on the side of Russian oil, Israeli drones, American semiconductors, and Chinese supply chains simultaneously, indefinitely, without eventually being forced to choose which of these relationships it values most. Nilekani’s concept of ‘productive promiscuity’ in partnerships¹²³ captures the strategy; but it does not

111. CAATSA — Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, Public Law 115-44, August 2, 2017. Section 231 mandates sanctions on states concluding significant transactions with Russia’s defence and intelligence sectors. India’s S-400 Triumph purchase of approximately USD 5.4 billion technically triggers CAATSA sanctions.

112. U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, ‘Hearing on U.S.-India Relations,’ op. cit.

113. Jake Sullivan and Ajit Doval, ‘Joint Statement on the India-U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET),’ January 31, 2023.

114. Michael Kugelman, ‘The Limits of the U.S.-India Partnership,’ Foreign Policy, March 14, 2023.

115. NITI Aayog, Government of India, ‘India’s Semiconductor Mission: Strategy and Roadmap,’ 2023.

116. S. Jaishankar, Speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, September 28, 2023. MEA Official Transcript.

117. Government of India, ‘India@2047: Viksit Bharat,’ NITI Aayog, op. cit.

118. Ministry of Finance, Economic Survey 2022-23, op. cit.

119. Arvind Panagariya, India: The Emerging Giant (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 399-422; Surjit Bhalla, The New Wealth of Nations (Simon & Schuster India, 2017), pp. 201-218.

120. NITI Aayog, ‘India’s Semiconductor Mission,’ op. cit.

121. MEA, ‘India’s Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council,’ op. cit.

122. Narendra Modi, ‘Statement at the G7 Summit, Hiroshima,’ May 20, 2023.

123. Nandan Nilekani, Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation (Penguin Press, 2008), pp. 411-430.

resolve the moment when productive promiscuity reaches its structural limit.

The Russia Relationship: Active Management, Not Passive Retention

The December 2021 India-Russia Annual Summit Joint Statement, the last full summit before the Ukraine invasion, records bilateral trade targets of USD 30 billion by 2025 and the designation of Russia as India's 'Privileged Strategic Partner', a designation used for no other state in India's formal diplomatic hierarchy¹²⁴. As Menon has argued, Russia's functions for India, UNSC veto, capacity to restrain Chinese adventurism in Central Asia, and historical willingness to supply India regardless of American objections, have no Western substitute¹²⁵. Vijay Gokhale's assessment after Galwan, that Russia was the only major power capable of serving as an informal de-escalation channel between New Delhi and Beijing,¹²⁶ illustrates the specific, crisis-relevant value of this relationship that no amount of American technology transfer can replicate.

The Diaspora as both Constraint and Asset

India's 9-million-strong Gulf diaspora and USD 36 billion in annual remittances¹²⁷ are simultaneously a constraint, preventing alignment with Israel and America on Iran, and a diplomatic asset. India's unique ability to speak to the Muslim world, the Gulf states, Iran, and Israel simultaneously is precisely what makes India irreplaceable as an interlocutor in Middle Eastern diplomacy. No Western democracy can maintain relationships of similar depth across this range of adversarial actors. The Saudi-India Strategic Partnership

Council Joint Statement¹²⁸ provides the institutional mechanism; the OIC resolution experience¹²⁹ defines the outer limit of how far India's domestic communal politics can strain these relationships before Gulf governments face domestic pressure to distance themselves from New Delhi.

Prescriptive Framework: Hard Choices and How to Make Them on India's Terms

Reframing Multi-Alignment: From Equidistance to Asymmetric Depth

The language of multi-alignment has served India well as a shield against alignment demands. But as American CAATSA threats¹³⁰ and technology conditionalities¹³¹ escalate, India needs a more sophisticated formulation. Jaishankar has articulated the core principle: India's challenge is 'to participate in a world of converging interests without being drawn into permanent alignments that constrain future choices'¹³². At the Raisina Dialogue in March 2023, he stated this with unusual directness: 'India does not need permission from other countries to define its national interest'¹³³. Brahma Chellaney has further argued that India's Quad participation does not compromise strategic autonomy as long as New Delhi avoids formal treaty obligations that would subordinate Indian decision-making to alliance management¹³⁴. Huntington's insight that civilisational fault-lines rather than merely ideological ones define contemporary conflict¹³⁵ helps explain why India, a civilisational democracy with roots in multiple cultural traditions, cannot be captured by any single ideological bloc's framework: its civilisational promiscuity is its strategic asset. India should make explicit what the policy

124. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India-Russia Annual Summit Joint Statement,' New Delhi, December 6, 2021.

125. Menon, 'India's Russia Policy,' op. cit.

126. Vijay Gokhale, 'The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations,' Carnegie India Working Paper, March 2021.

127. MEA, Annual Report 2022-23, Chapter on Indian Diaspora, op. cit.

128. MEA, 'Joint Statement: India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council,' op. cit.

129. OIC, 'Resolution on the Situation of Muslims in India,' op. cit.

130. CAATSA, Public Law 115-44, op. cit.

131. Sullivan, 'Remarks on Renewing American Economic Leadership,' op. cit.

132. Jaishankar, *The India Way*, op. cit., p. 171.

133. S. Jaishankar, Address at the Raisina Dialogue, New Delhi, March 2, 2023. MEA Official Transcript, ref. MEA/RD/2023/03.

134. Brahma Chellaney, 'India's Strategic Autonomy and the Quad,' *The Japan Times*, May 18, 2023.

135. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 183-206.

already implies: the US-India technology partnership (iCET, GE-414, MQ-9B)¹³⁶ is categorically deeper in strategic depth than the Russia-India arms relationship, which India is deliberately diversifying through DAP 2020¹³⁷. Communicating this asymmetry proactively, rather than waiting for American impatience to generate policy confrontation, is the first prescriptive priority. Jaishankar has gestured toward this with his distinction between ‘convergences of interest’ and formal alliance commitments;¹³⁸ India must now operationalise that distinction with concrete deliverables.

Managing American Impatience: Offer Deliverables, Not Solidarity

The United States does not need India’s moral solidarity on Ukraine; it needs India’s strategic utility in the Indo-Pacific. India should offer concrete, measurable deliverables in the China-containing domain, supply chain diversification away from China, semiconductor partnership conditionalities that actually restrict China-directed technology flows, enhanced Quad operational exercises, in exchange for American acceptance of India’s Russia policy and a permanent, legislated CAATSA waiver.¹³⁹ The iCET framework¹⁴⁰ is the right mechanism. The June 2023 PMO-White House Joint Statement¹⁴¹ is the template. India must scale this approach systematically rather than allowing each bilateral negotiation to become a fresh site of American pressure about Russia and Ukraine.

Managing the Diaspora Constraint: Institutionalise the Two-Track Approach

India’s two-track approach, deepening the Israel defence partnership while publicly reaffirming Palestinian statehood support,¹⁴² is not hypocrisy but the only

structurally available policy. The Gulf states that host India’s diaspora are themselves pursuing exactly this approach, maintaining American security ties while institutionally expressing Islamic solidarity. India should actively coordinate its Middle East posture with Saudi Arabia and the UAE through the Strategic Partnership Council framework,¹⁴³ developing shared positions on Gulf security, Iran’s nuclear programme, and Palestinian statehood that allow both states to maintain their American and Israeli relationships while protecting their domestic Muslim political requirements. The Abraham Accords model,¹⁴⁴ Arab-Israeli normalisation without formal resolution of the Palestinian question, is the diplomatic template India should quietly support while publicly reaffirming its traditional solidarity with Palestinian statehood.

The Russia Relationship: Sustain Independence, Not Dependence

India’s Russia relationship must be actively managed with a clear strategic objective: sustain Russia’s capacity for independent action from China, while reducing India’s own operational dependence on Russian hardware. The two goals are compatible: India buys discounted Russian oil (sustaining Russian economic capacity), accelerates DAP 2020-driven indigenisation (reducing operational dependence on Russian weapons), and uses Russia’s back-channel diplomatic capacity, its ability to speak to Beijing, Islamabad, and Tehran, as an active instrument of Indian regional management¹⁴⁵. India does not need Russia to be strong; it needs Russia to be independent. An independent Russia, even a weakened one, is structurally more valuable to India than a China-subordinate Russia¹⁴⁶.

136. PMO, ‘Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister to the USA,’ op. cit.

137. Ministry of Defence, Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020, op. cit.

138. Jaishankar, *The India Way*, op. cit., pp. 88-97.

139. The White House, ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,’ February 2022, pp. 5-9.

140. Sullivan and Doval, ‘Joint Statement on iCET,’ op. cit.

141. PMO, ‘Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister to the USA,’ op. cit.

142. Jaishankar, Press Statement on Palestinian Authority Meeting, op. cit.

143. MEA, ‘Joint Statement: India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council,’ op. cit.

144. The White House, ‘The Abraham Accords Declaration,’ op. cit.

145. Ministry of Defence, Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020, op. cit.

146. Xavier, ‘India’s Russia Challenge,’ op. cit.

UNSC Reform: The Non-Negotiable Ambition That Must Be Traded For

India's permanent UNSC membership is not merely a prestige objective; it is the structural prerequisite for all other Indian foreign policy ambitions¹⁴⁷. The G20 New Delhi Declaration¹⁴⁸ demonstrated India's capacity to chair a polarised multilateral forum and produce substantive consensus, the skill set that UNSC permanent membership requires. India must use the window of current American goodwill, expressed through the Indo-Pacific Strategy's designation of India as a 'Major Defence Partner',¹⁴⁹ to extract explicit American commitment to India's UNSC bid in exchange for the deliverables Washington wants on China. This is the one hard choice India cannot indefinitely defer: UNSC reform requires a transaction, and India must be willing to name its price and pay Washington's.

Civilizational Diplomacy: Making India's Uniqueness Structural

Jaishankar's *Why Bharat Matters* frames India's civilizational identity as a diplomatic asset.¹⁵⁰ Sen's 'argumentative tradition'¹⁵¹ provides the intellectual foundation. But civilizational diplomacy must be given institutional form: India's UPI payment system, Aadhaar digital identity architecture, and CoWIN vaccination platform are exportable governance technologies that create durable dependency relationships with recipient states¹⁵². Britain's UK-India 2030 Roadmap¹⁵³ and the digital infrastructure cooperation it envisions represent the beginning of this institutionalisation. India must scale these initiatives aggressively as complements to, not substitutes for, the hard strategic choices this section has described. Civilizational diplomacy without the backing of hard strategic choices is not diplomacy; it is aspiration.

Conclusion: The Architecture of Constrained Autonomy

This paper began with a question about whether wars cause or result from the changing balance of power. The answer, as the foregoing analysis demonstrates, is that they do both simultaneously, and in doing so, they force every other state to reveal, through its responses and evasions, the true architecture of its interests and constraints. For India, the two wars under examination have stripped away the comfortable ambiguity that multi-alignment as a rhetorical formula once provided. India's 200-million Muslim citizens and 9-million Gulf workers prevent any simple Israel-and-America alignment on Iran¹⁵⁴. America's China-driven impatience is translating CAATSA threats and technology conditionalities into real structural pressure¹⁵⁵. Russia's absorption into the China orbit, the 'no limits' partnership,¹⁵⁶ makes Russia's indispensability simultaneously more urgent and more complicated. And India's own *Viksit Bharat 2047* ambitions¹⁵⁷ are generating the very hard choices that multi-alignment rhetoric has, until now, allowed India's foreign policy establishment to defer with elegant formulations about convergences of interest and principled distance.

What this paper has argued is that India's multi-alignment is not freely chosen strategic wisdom but structurally constrained necessity and that understanding this distinction is the prerequisite for making it work more effectively. The diaspora constraint is not merely a liability to be managed but an asset to be deployed. India's unique ability to speak to the Muslim world, the Gulf states, Iran, and Israel simultaneously is precisely what makes India irreplaceable as an interlocutor in Middle Eastern diplomacy. The American impatience is not a crisis to be appeased but a negotiating dynamic to be managed. Washington needs India's Indo-Pacific utility more than

147. MEA, 'India's Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council,' op. cit.

148. MEA, 'India's G20 Presidency: New Delhi Leaders' Declaration,' op. cit.

149. The White House, 'Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,' op. cit.

150. S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (Rupa Publications, 2024), pp. 9-22.

151. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 3-11.

152. Nandan Nilekani and Viral Shah, *Rebooting India* (Penguin Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 211-230.

153. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 'UK-India 2030 Roadmap: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,' May 4, 2021.

154. Census of India 2011; Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, op. cit.

155. CAATSA, Public Law 115-44, op. cit.

156. Putin and Xi Jinping, 'Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era,' op. cit.

it needs India's Ukraine solidarity, and India should negotiate accordingly, with concrete deliverables rather than diplomatic assurances. The Russia relationship is not a legacy to be excused but a strategic function to be maintained at precisely the level necessary to preserve Russian independence from China; no more, no less.

India cannot be on the side of peace and simultaneously on the side of Russian oil, Israeli drones, American semiconductors, and Chinese supply chains indefinitely, without eventually making explicit the choices that its structural constraints have until now allowed it to defer. The G20 New Delhi Declaration¹⁵⁸ proved that India can synthesise between adversarial blocs when it has the institutional moment and diplomatic skill. The June 2023 Modi-Biden Joint Statement¹⁵⁹ proved that India can extract transformative technology commitments from Washington without endorsing Washington's Russia policy. And India's UN abstentions,¹⁶⁰ costly in Western public opinion but strategic in Russian and Global South terms, proved that principled distance is not a formula but a practice that requires daily recalibration and genuine costs.

Nehru declared that India would never be 'a camp follower of any power or group of powers'¹⁶¹. In a world of two deeply consequential wars that each demand camp-following, India's refusal to comply is not a failure of solidarity. It is, as this paper has argued through the evidence of official policy documents, military operational realities, demographic constraints, and civilizational ambitions, the most consequential act of independent statecraft available to a rising power that is simultaneously neighbour to China, partner to America, buyer from Russia, friend to Israel, host to the Gulf's Indian workforce, and home to the world's second-largest Muslim community. Managing all of these relationships simultaneously, without losing any of them catastrophically, is not multi-alignment as philosophy. It is India's irreducible strategic reality and the defining foreign policy challenge of India's third decade of the twenty-first century.

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160. MEA, 'India's Explanation of Vote on UNGA Resolution ES-11/1,' op. cit.
161. Nehru, 'Tryst With Destiny,' op. cit.

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