



Power Asymmetry and Strategic Leverage: India's Relations with Global Superpowers.

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Abstract

India's relations with global superpowers are shaped by pronounced asymmetries of power and capability, which both constrain and enable its strategic choices. This article examines how India converts structural disadvantages vis-à-vis established and rising superpowers into strategic leverage through diplomacy, selective alignment, and issue-based cooperation. Focusing on India's engagements with the United States, Russia, and China, the study analyses how India navigates unequal military, economic, and technological relationships while preserving strategic autonomy. It argues that India mitigates power asymmetries by exploiting its geopolitical centrality, market size, and normative appeal, allowing it to influence great-power behaviour without formal alliances. The article contributes to debates on asymmetric relations and middle-power agency by demonstrating how India employs flexibility and leverage to manage hierarchy within an evolving multi-polar order.

Keywords : Power Asymmetry, Strategic Leverage, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-alignment, Selective Alignment, Issue-based Cooperation, Hierarchy in International Relations, Middle-Power Agency, Rising Powers, Hedging and Soft Balancing, Multilateral Institutions, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Global South Diplomacy, Multi-polar World Order.

Introduction

The contemporary international system is characterized by pronounced inequalities in material capabilities, technological sophistication, and institutional influence, producing hierarchical relationships between states. While traditional theories of international relations have often treated such power asymmetries as sources of constraint for weaker actors, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes the capacity of non-dominant states to exercise agency, negotiate hierarchy, and extract strategic benefits from unequal relationships. This reorientation is particularly relevant in the context of a transitioning global order marked by the relative diffusion of power, the erosion of rigid bipolarity, and the coexistence of established and rising superpowers. Within this environment, India occupies a distinctive position: it is neither a superpower nor a peripheral state, but a rising power with significant regional and global ambitions operating under conditions of persistent asymmetry.

India's relations with global superpowers—most notably the United States, Russia, and China—are shaped by enduring disparities in military capabilities, economic scale, technological advancement, and global reach. Yet these asymmetries have not resulted in formal subordination or alliance dependence. Instead, India has pursued a foreign policy strategy that emphasizes strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and issue-based cooperation. This approach reflects both structural realities and historically rooted preferences arising from India's postcolonial experience and its long-standing commitment to non-alignment. Consequently, India provides an analytically rich case for examining how states manage hierarchy and convert structural disadvantages into sources of strategic leverage.

This paper argues that power asymmetry does not operate solely as a limiting condition in India's external relations but also generates opportunities for bargaining and influence. India mitigates asymmetric constraints by leveraging its geopolitical centrality in the Indo-Pacific, its growing economic and demographic weight, its expanding role in multilateral institutions,

and its normative appeal as a representative of the Global South. Through calibrated engagement rather than formal alignment, India has been able to deepen cooperation with competing superpowers while preserving decision-making autonomy. Such behaviour challenges binary interpretations of alignment versus non-alignment and underscores the importance of flexibility, diversification, and institutional embedding as mechanisms of influence.

The study situates India within broader theoretical debates on hierarchy, asymmetric relationships, and middle-power agency. By comparatively examining India's interactions with the United States, Russia, and China, it moves beyond dyadic or region-specific analyses to identify cross-cutting strategies through which India manages different configurations of asymmetry. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to international relations scholarship by demonstrating how rising powers can shape outcomes within hierarchical systems without possessing dominant material capabilities.

Empirically, the article focuses on the post-Cold War period, particularly developments since the early 2000s, when India's international engagement expanded significantly alongside systemic shifts toward multi-polarity. Analytically, it foregrounds the concept of strategic leverage to explain how India transforms constraints into bargaining advantages across bilateral and multilateral contexts. The central claim advanced here is that India's foreign policy behaviour reflects neither dependence nor simple balancing, but a sustained effort to negotiate hierarchy through selective alignment, institutional participation, and strategic flexibility.

By addressing how India manages power asymmetry across multiple superpower relationships simultaneously, this study fills an important gap in existing scholarship. It also offers broader implications for understanding how other rising and middle powers navigate unequal power structures in an evolving global order.

Research Questions:

1. How does India manage power asymmetries in its relations with global superpowers to generate strategic leverage while preserving strategic autonomy?
2. What forms of power asymmetry (military, economic, technological, diplomatic) characterize India's relations with the United States, Russia, and China?
3. How does India convert structural constraints into sources of bargaining leverage in bilateral and multilateral engagements?
4. To what extent do selective alignment, issue-based cooperation, and institutional participation enable India to mitigate asymmetry?
5. How do India's historical experiences with non-alignment and strategic autonomy shape its contemporary responses to hierarchy in global politics?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in positivist epistemology to explain how India manages power asymmetries in its relations with global superpowers. The analysis identifies causal mechanisms linking structural asymmetry to observable strategic behaviour and specifies the conditions under which material constraints generate strategic leverage while preserving strategic autonomy.

The empirical focus is on India's bilateral relations with the United States, Russia, and China. Cases are selected using a most-different systems design, maximizing variation in the scale and composition of power asymmetry—military, economic, technological, and diplomatic—while holding constant India's core strategic preferences, institutional structure, and commitment to autonomy. The United States represents asymmetry rooted in technological and institutional dominance; Russia reflects asymmetry shaped by historical defence dependence and declining relative power; and China constitutes a comprehensive asymmetry encompassing economic scale, military modernization, and regional influence. This design facilitates identification of strategic mechanisms that operate across heterogeneous structural contexts rather than dyad-specific outcomes.

Power asymmetry, the independent variable, is operationalized through relative disparities in military expenditure, economic output, technological capacity, and diplomatic reach, measured using standardized international indicators. Strategic leverage, the intervening variable, is captured through observable policy behaviours, including selective alignment, diversification of defence procurement, participation in multilateral institutions, and issue-specific cooperation. Strategic autonomy, the dependent variable, is operationalized as the absence of formal alliance commitments, sustained independent policy choice, and the maintenance of multiple strategic options across issue areas.

The study relies on systematically collected secondary data. Primary sources include official Indian government documents, bilateral agreements, joint statements, policy speeches, and parliamentary records. These are supplemented by institutional documents from multilateral forums and internationally recognized datasets on military expenditure, trade, and economic performance, which establish baseline levels of asymmetry. Peer-reviewed academic literature and policy analyses are used to contextualize empirical observations. Triangulation across multiple source types strengthens measurement validity and mitigates single-source bias.

The analytical strategy integrates within-case process tracing with structured cross-case comparison. Process tracing reconstructs temporal sequences linking shifts in structural asymmetry to subsequent policy choices in each bilateral relationship, allowing identification of intermediate causal steps and enhancing internal validity. Cross-case comparison evaluates whether similar strategic mechanisms—such as selective alignment or institutional embedding—are consistently deployed across different asymmetry profiles. Qualitative content analysis is used to code official discourse and policy outputs for indicators of strategic leverage and autonomy, enabling systematic comparison across cases.

The temporal scope covers the post–Cold War period, with emphasis on developments since the early 2000s, a phase marked by India’s expanding international engagement and evolving strategic partnerships. Internal validity is reinforced through explicit operationalization of variables and consistent application of analytical criteria. Reliability is supported by transparent case selection and replicable coding procedures based on publicly accessible sources. External validity is pursued through theory-oriented generalization, with findings applicable to other rising and middle powers managing asymmetric relationships in a multi-polar international system.

Literature Review:

Power Asymmetry and Strategic Leverage in India’s Relations with Global Superpowers: The dynamics of power asymmetry occupy a central place in international relations theory and are particularly salient in India’s interactions with global superpowers. Traditional realist scholarship conceptualizes international politics as a system structured by unequal distributions of material capabilities, generating hierarchical relationships between dominant and subordinate states.¹ However, more recent work challenges the assumption that asymmetry necessarily translates into subordination, emphasizing negotiation, bargaining, and agency within hierarchical systems.² This shift provides an important analytical foundation for understanding how India navigates structural inequality in its relations with the United States, Russia, and China.

Power Asymmetry, Hierarchy, and State Agency: Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism posits that weaker states must adapt to constraints imposed by the international system, often through balancing or bandwagoning.³ Yet scholars such as David Lake argue that hierarchy in international politics is relational rather than absolute, allowing weaker states to extract benefits and exercise influence through strategic compliance and resistance.⁴ Similarly, Kang’s work on asymmetric relationships highlights how acceptance or rejection of hierarchy is shaped by domestic perceptions and strategic calculations rather than material power alone.⁵ These perspectives are particularly relevant for India, which has consistently resisted formal subordination while engaging dominant powers.

Strategic Autonomy and India’s Postcolonial Foreign Policy Tradition: India’s approach to power asymmetry is deeply rooted in its postcolonial experience and the doctrine of strategic autonomy. Jawaharlal Nehru’s articulation of non-alignment was not a policy of neutrality but an effort to preserve decision-making freedom in a bipolar world.⁶ Scholars such as Bajpai and Mohan argue that strategic autonomy has remained a guiding principle of Indian foreign policy, even as its operational form has evolved.⁷ Contemporary analyses emphasize that autonomy today is pursued through diversification of partnerships rather than disengagement, reflecting India’s adaptation to a multi-polar order.⁸

India as a Middle and Rising Power:

The classification of India as a middle or rising power has generated significant debate. Middle-power theorists emphasize diplomacy, coalition-building, and institutional activism as tools through which states lacking material dominance exercise influence.⁹ Applied to India, this framework explains its prominent role in multilateral institutions such as BRICS, the G20, and issue-based coalitions in climate governance and global health.¹⁰ Scholars argue that India’s leverage derives less from raw power and more from its geopolitical centrality, demographic weight, and normative legitimacy.¹¹

India–United States Relations: Managing Asymmetry through Convergence

The literature on India–US relations highlights a relationship characterized by growing strategic convergence despite persistent asymmetries in military and technological capabilities. Analysts note that India has leveraged its role in the Indo-Pacific and its democratic credentials to deepen cooperation without entering a formal alliance.¹² Defence agreements, technology partnerships, and institutionalized dialogues are often interpreted as outcomes of asymmetric bargaining rather than dependence.¹³ This body of work underscores India’s ability to extract strategic value while maintaining policy autonomy.

India–Russia Relations: Legacy Ties and Managed Dependence

India’s relationship with Russia is frequently analyzed through the lens of historical continuity and defence dependence. Scholars emphasize the persistence of asymmetry, particularly in military procurement and nuclear cooperation.¹⁴ However, recent literature highlights India’s efforts to renegotiate this dependence by diversifying suppliers and using diplomatic neutrality as leverage amid Russia’s strained relations with the West.¹⁵ This suggests a shift from dependency to what can be described as managed asymmetry, where India preserves strategic options without severing legacy ties.

India–China Relations: Asymmetric Rivalry and Strategic Resistance

India–China relations are widely interpreted as an asymmetric rivalry shaped by power transition dynamics and unresolved territorial disputes. China’s superior economic and military capabilities create structural constraints, yet scholars argue that India has resisted hierarchical incorporation into a Sino-centric Asian order.¹⁶ India’s rejection of the Belt and Road Initiative, military modernization, and partnerships with like-minded states are viewed as strategies to counter asymmetry without direct confrontation.¹⁷ Border crises are thus interpreted not merely as security dilemmas but as contests over status and hierarchy.¹⁸

Hedging, Soft Balancing, and Strategic Leverage

Recent theoretical literature increasingly frames India’s behaviour through the concepts of hedging and soft balancing. Hedging allows states to pursue contradictory policies—engaging and resisting dominant powers simultaneously—to mitigate uncertainty.¹⁹ Applied to India, this framework explains its simultaneous engagement with competing superpowers across different issue areas. Scholars argue that such strategies transform asymmetry into bargaining leverage, enabling states to influence outcomes without alliance commitments.²⁰

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite extensive bilateral studies, the literature largely treats India’s relations with the United States, Russia, and China in isolation. There remains a gap in comparative analyses that examine how India manages asymmetry across multiple superpowers simultaneously. Moreover, existing studies often focus on outcomes—alignment or non-alignment—rather than on the processes through which India converts constraints into leverage.

1. Indian management of power asymmetries in its relations with global superpowers:

India manages power asymmetries through a strategy of calibrated engagement rather than formal alignment, reflecting both structural constraints and historical preferences. Despite substantial gaps in military expenditure, technological sophistication, and global force projection vis-à-vis superpowers, India has consistently avoided treaty alliances such as NATO-style collective defence arrangements. Instead, it practices multi-alignment, simultaneously deepening strategic cooperation with the United States, sustaining defence and energy ties with Russia, and selectively engaging China in economic and institutional forums.²¹

Concrete manifestations of this approach include India’s signing of foundational defence agreements with the United States (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) without accepting alliance obligations, while simultaneously procuring the Russian S-400 air defence system despite U.S. sanctions pressure.²² India’s strategic leverage further derives from its role as a key Indo-Pacific actor, a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, and a pivotal voice for the Global South, as evidenced by its leadership during the G20 presidency and advocacy for development finance reform.²³ This combination enables India to extract strategic benefits while resisting hierarchical subordination, transforming asymmetry into negotiated influence rather than dependency.²⁴

2. power asymmetry characterize India's relations with the United States, Russia, and China:

India's asymmetric relationships differ significantly across partners and domains. In its relations with the United States, asymmetry is most visible in advanced military technologies, intelligence capabilities, and innovation ecosystems, with the U.S. maintaining a decisive edge in defence R&D and global force projection. However, this imbalance is partially offset by India's geopolitical centrality in the Indo-Pacific, its growing defence market, and its role in counterbalancing China.²⁵

With Russia, asymmetry is narrower in conventional military cooperation but persists through India's long-standing dependence on Russian-origin platforms, which constitute a majority of India's frontline military assets, as well as cooperation in nuclear energy and hydrocarbons.²⁶ At the same time, Russia's relative economic weakness and diplomatic isolation have increased India's bargaining space.

In contrast, China represents the most comprehensive asymmetry. China's GDP is nearly five times larger than India's, its manufacturing capacity dominates global supply chains, and its military modernization has accelerated across land, sea, cyber, and space domains.²⁷ These asymmetries are compounded by unresolved border disputes and China's expansive regional initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Diplomatically, India remains structurally weaker but compensates through multilateral activism, coalition-building, and resistance to China-centric regional orders.²⁸

3. Conversion of structural constraints into sources of bargaining leverage in bilateral and multilateral engagements:

India converts structural constraints into bargaining leverage by strategically commodifying both dependence and potential. Defence dependence has been transformed into leverage through supplier diversification, with India expanding procurement from the United States, France, Israel, and domestic manufacturers, thereby reducing vulnerability to any single partner.²⁹ Economic constraints are offset by India's long-term market potential, which encourages foreign powers to offer technology transfers, co-production arrangements, and investment incentives.

At the multilateral level, India has leveraged its demographic weight, economic growth trajectory, and institutional presence to shape outcomes disproportionate to its material power. Its activism in the G20, BRICS, WTO, and climate negotiations has allowed it to influence agendas on debt relief, digital public infrastructure, vaccine equity, and climate finance.³⁰ By maintaining exit options and avoiding exclusive commitments, India enhances its negotiating position, illustrating that structural constraints redefine rather than eliminate agency.³¹

4. Selective alignment, issue-based cooperation, and institutional participation enable India to mitigate asymmetry:

Selective alignment and issue-based cooperation play a decisive role in mitigating asymmetry. India pursues domain-specific convergence rather than comprehensive partnerships—maritime security and technology cooperation with the United States, defence and nuclear energy ties with Russia, and controlled economic engagement with China where interests overlap.³²

Institutional participation amplifies India's influence by embedding it within rule-making processes and coalition networks. Platforms such as the Quad, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, G20, and BRICS enable India to balance power collectively while avoiding alliance entanglements. India's leadership in initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and digital public goods further demonstrates how institutions serve as force multipliers for states facing material asymmetry.³³ These strategies disperse dependence, reduce vulnerability, and enhance diplomatic maneuverability.³⁴

5. India's experiences of non-alignment and strategic autonomy shape its contemporary responses to hierarchy in global politics:

India's postcolonial experience and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement continue to shape its resistance to hierarchical incorporation. Non-alignment fostered a deep normative commitment to sovereignty, autonomy, and independent judgment, which remains evident in India's reluctance to join military blocs or accept external constraints on policy choices.³⁵

Rather than rejecting engagement, India has **reinterpreted non-alignment** for a multipolar era by pursuing autonomy through diversification, flexibility, and institutional activism. This historical consciousness explains India's emphasis on strategic autonomy in official discourse, its willingness to disagree with partners on issues such as sanctions and trade, and its preference for negotiated hierarchy over subordination.³⁶ Consequently, India's contemporary responses to global power structures reflect continuity in strategic purpose even as instruments and partners evolve.³⁷

Conclusion

This article has argued that power asymmetry does not mechanically translate into hierarchy or strategic subordination in India's relations with global superpowers. Instead, India has developed a distinctive practice of calibrated engagement that enables it to operate within materially unequal relationships while preserving strategic autonomy. By avoiding formal alliance commitments and pursuing multi-alignment, India converts asymmetry into negotiated influence rather than dependency. This strategy reflects not only present-day structural constraints but also historically embedded preferences shaped by India's postcolonial experience and its enduring resistance to externally imposed hierarchy.

The analysis demonstrates that asymmetry is neither uniform nor static across India's relationships with the United States, Russia, and China, and that these variations generate differentiated strategic responses. In its engagement with the United States, asymmetry is concentrated in advanced military technologies, intelligence capabilities, and innovation ecosystems. Yet this imbalance is partially offset by India's geopolitical centrality in the Indo-Pacific and its strategic value in regional balancing dynamics. In relations with Russia, asymmetry is mediated through legacy defence dependence and cooperation in energy and nuclear sectors; however, Russia's declining relative power has expanded India's bargaining space, allowing New Delhi greater latitude in shaping the terms of engagement. China represents the most comprehensive and consequential asymmetry, encompassing economic scale, military modernisation, and regional influence, compounded by unresolved territorial disputes and competing visions of regional order. In this relationship, India relies less on bilateral accommodation and more on coalition-building, institutional activism, and resistance to China-centred regional hierarchies.

Across these cases, the study identifies a consistent causal mechanism through which India converts structural constraints into bargaining leverage. Dependence—whether in defence procurement, energy supplies, or market access—is neither denied nor eliminated but strategically managed through diversification, issue linkage, and the preservation of exit options. India's demographic scale, long-term market potential, and growing institutional presence function as latent sources of influence that enhance its negotiating position in both bilateral and multilateral settings. Asymmetry thus reshapes the terms of engagement without extinguishing agency.

Selective alignment, issue-based cooperation, and institutional participation emerge as the central instruments through which India mitigates vulnerability and amplifies influence. By compartmentalizing cooperation across policy domains, India avoids comprehensive dependence on any single partner while extracting issue-specific gains. Institutional embedding further reinforces this strategy by situating India within overlapping networks of rules, norms, and coalitions. Forums such as the Quad, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the G20 operate not merely as sites of coordination but as arenas in which India can shape agendas, constrain dominant actors, and resist exclusive strategic commitments. Through these mechanisms, India extends its influence beyond what material capabilities alone would suggest.

The findings also underscore the enduring significance of India's non-aligned tradition in shaping its contemporary foreign policy. Strategic autonomy remains the organizing principle through which India interprets and responds to hierarchy in global politics. Rather than abandoning non-alignment, India has adapted it to a multi-polar environment by emphasizing flexibility, diversification, and institutional engagement. This historical continuity explains India's reluctance to enter formal alliances, its willingness to diverge from partners on issues such as sanctions and trade, and its preference for negotiated hierarchy over subordination.

Taken together, this study contributes to broader debates on power asymmetry by demonstrating that rising and middle powers retain meaningful scope for strategic agency even under conditions of material inequality. India's experience suggests that hierarchy in international politics is not simply imposed by dominant states but is actively negotiated through selective alignment, institutional positioning, and strategic diversification. Asymmetry conditions behaviour, but it does not predetermine outcomes.

More broadly, the analysis invites renewed attention to how historically non-aligned states navigate asymmetric power relations in an increasingly fragmented and multi-polar international order. By identifying the mechanisms through which India converts constraint into leverage, this article offers a framework for understanding how non-hegemonic actors can preserve autonomy while remaining deeply embedded in global governance structures. In doing so, it challenges deterministic accounts of hierarchy and reaffirms the importance of agency, history, and institutional choice in the study of international politics.

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