Chintan Research Foundation

SIS 1955-2025 School of International Studies Seven Decades of Excellence



EVENT REPORT

Roundtable Discussion

BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ALIGNMENT

Can India Still Choose Its Own Foreign Policy?

14 October 2026

The Grand Hotel, New Delhi

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OVERVIEW

The Chintan Research Foundation (CRF), in collaboration with the School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), convened a roundtable on "Between Autonomy and Alignment: Can India Still Choose Its Own Foreign Policy?" on 14 October 2026. Bringing together serving and former practitioners, diplomats, scholars and specialists in regional and international affairs, the discussion examined the nature and limits of India's strategic autonomy amid geopolitical competition, economic coercion, technological change and institutional uncertainty.

The event comprised opening remarks, a keynote address, two substantive sessions and concluding observations. The first session focused on the conceptual meaning and geopolitical pressures surrounding strategic autonomy; the second considered the practical sources of leverage, including security partnerships, trade, manufacturing, technology and energy. The proceedings were marked by substantive differences rather than a uniform consensus: speakers disagreed over whether India should describe its policy as multi-alignment or multi-engagement, how much freedom India has in relation to China and the United States, and whether autonomous action is best secured through national capacity or coordinated partnerships.



WELCOME REMARKS



SHRI SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI
President,
Chintan Research Foundation

Welcoming the panelists and participants, Shri Shishir Priyadarshi, President of the Chintan Research Foundation (CRF), highlighted the growing complexities of India's foreign policy environment and the challenges of preserving strategic autonomy amid intensifying geopolitical competition. He noted that India's pursuit of an independent foreign policy had become increasingly demanding in a world characterised by continuous strategic pressures and the growing weaponisation of economic, technological and political interdependencies.

He emphasised that strategic autonomy must be understood within the broader context of evolving great-power rivalries, where countries are increasingly pressured to take sides. India's approach, he observed, is rooted in the belief that countries should retain the freedom to determine their international relationships independently, even when their partners have competing interests. Maintaining constructive relations with different powers should therefore be viewed as an effort to expand strategic choices rather than as a contradiction in foreign policy.

Clarifying the concept, he underscored that strategic autonomy should not be confused with isolation, neutrality or disengagement from international affairs. Nor does it imply an unwillingness to take positions on global developments. Rather, it entails making independent judgments based on national interests without allowing external pressures to dictate policy decisions. He further observed that the increasingly interconnected nature of international relations has made this more challenging, as decisions concerning trade, energy, technology and investment can no longer be considered independently of national security.

Drawing attention to multilateral diplomacy, he raised the question of how India's commitment to strategic autonomy affects its engagement with international institutions and global governance mechanisms. He noted that maintaining relationships with diverse international actors could strengthen India's position in multilateral forums, particularly in efforts to influence institutional reforms and assume leadership roles. However, India's independent positions may not always be viewed favourably by other major powers, potentially complicating its diplomatic objectives.

He argued that the success of strategic autonomy should be measured not by the number of India's partnerships, but by the tangible benefits they provide in technology, investment, markets, energy security and defence capabilities. Concluding his remarks, he emphasised that India's foreign policy choices must remain guided by national interests rather than external pressures, requiring careful judgment in an uncertain global order.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



MS APARNA RAY
Joint secretary (CCCS),
Ministry of External Affairs

Delivering the keynote address, Ms. Aparna Ray, Joint Secretary (CCCS), Ministry of External Affairs, challenged the conventional framing of autonomy and alignment as competing foreign policy choices. She argued that autonomy and alignment are neither binary choices nor opposite ends of a spectrum but are intrinsically linked. The freedom to determine whom to align with, on which issues and under what circumstances is itself at the core of strategic autonomy. Drawing on her diplomatic experience, she emphasised that India's foreign policy should be guided by its own interests rather than expectations of choosing sides in geopolitical rivalries.

Ms. Ray situated this argument within an international order characterised by institutional strain, flexible coalitions and the growing influence of middle powers. She observed that what some described as fragmentation could also be understood as diversity, creating opportunities for greater influence through issue-based alliances. The inequalities and coercive pressures associated with the international order, she noted, were not new experiences for India and the Global South. Platforms including the Quad, BRICS and I2U2 illustrated flexible arrangements prioritising specific objectives over exclusive political commitments.

Nevertheless, she cautioned that an emerging multipolar order had intensified the weaponisation of trade and economic interdependence. Institutions designed to manage international disputes, including the WTO dispute-settlement system and the UN Security Council, were also facing considerable strain. The central question, therefore, was how India defined its foreign policy interests, determined its priorities and established the terms of international engagement.

Turning to China, Ms. Ray highlighted that the international system could not realistically exclude China from global economic and regional structures. She highlighted the evolution of international approaches towards China, from engagement to de-risking and managed competition, noting the absence of a definitive framework for navigating these relationships. The India–China relationship, she suggested, required an interpretation beyond trade-deficit figures, as trade deficits did not necessarily indicate strategic dependence. India needed assessments grounded in its own economic circumstances and strategic priorities.

She further emphasised the importance of strengthening indigenous research and policy expertise. Referring to the extensive network of Indian institutions engaged in China studies, she highlighted the need for stronger coordination between academia, government and industry, as well as on other area studies. Such collaboration would help develop

independent perspectives on international developments and strengthen the intellectual foundations of India's strategic autonomy.

The address concluded with a call for an Indian normative vision of international affairs. Drawing on her WTO negotiating experience, Ms. Ray observed that positions advanced by developed countries were often presented as universal principles, while India's positions were characterised as exceptions. She argued that genuine strategic autonomy required India not merely to participate in existing rule-making processes but also to articulate its own understanding of global norms, enabling it to contribute more effectively to shaping a multipolar international order.



SESSION I: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY UNDER PRESSURE: CAN INDIA STILL CHOOSE ITS OWN PATH?



AMB. BHASWATI MUKHERJEE
Former Indian Diplomat

Introducing the session, the moderator challenged the assumption that strategic autonomy and alignment necessarily stood in opposition. She distinguished contemporary strategic autonomy from the historically specific non-alignment of the Cold War, arguing that the present moment was better described as an interregnum in which an older international order was weakening without an established replacement. In this unsettled environment, India's foreign policy should allow it to avoid conflicts unrelated to its interests while safeguarding the development agenda.

She also connected strategic autonomy to India's aspiration to speak for the Global South and to participate meaningfully in alternative multilateral arrangements. India's democratic character, scale and international relevance were cited as sources of diplomatic choice. At the same time, the moderator warned that regional insecurity and the possibility of conflict made autonomy difficult in practice. In interventions throughout the session, she drew attention to the role of historical experience, domestic political opinion, India's immediate neighbourhood and the risks of assuming that outside powers would support India in a crisis.



PROF. ALKA ACHARYA
Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

Professor Alka Acharya began by questioning the definitions embedded in the theme of the roundtable. Neither autonomy nor alignment, she argued, could be absolute: policy operated across degrees of freedom and constraint. The task was therefore to define the terms precisely and situate them in a world undergoing deep changes in established political and economic arrangements. Security, sovereignty and development, the principal aims of national policy, were increasingly subject to negotiation and compromise. She questioned the conventional framing of US–China rivalry as the defining fact of international politics and the corresponding assumption that India would inevitably be forced to take sides. Much of the Indian discourse, she observed, drew on Western ideas about China's rise, hegemonic transition and great-power confrontation. A more historically grounded analysis would recognise that the United States and China had long combined rivalry, bargaining, cooperation and mutual economic entanglement.

Professor Acharya also raised doubts about the proposition that US–China rapprochement would automatically benefit India, given the role played by concerns about China in bringing New Delhi and Washington closer. She emphasised the significance of China's qualitative transformation into an advanced manufacturing and technological power, including in artificial intelligence. India's choices in dealing with China would be conditioned strongly by geography and economics, and would require an independent assessment of India's limited leverage in some emerging strategic sectors.

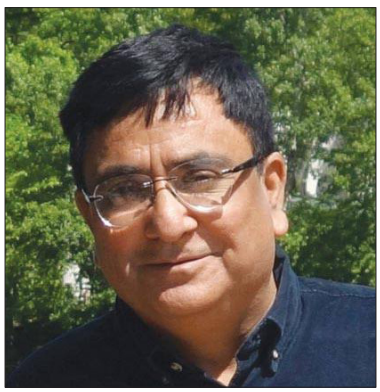


AMB. RAJIV BHATIA
Distinguished Fellow,
Gateway House

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia began by highlighting the continuity and evolution of India's foreign policy, arguing that multi-alignment was the natural successor to non-alignment. He observed that while non-alignment emerged in a bipolar international order, multi-alignment reflected the realities of an increasingly multipolar world. In his view, contemporary strategic autonomy represented a continuation of India's longstanding commitment to independent foreign policy decision-making, adapted to changing geopolitical circumstances. He emphasised that pragmatism and the pursuit of national interests remained the underlying principles guiding India's external engagements.

Addressing the pressures confronting India's strategic autonomy, Ambassador Bhatia expressed concern over recent US policies, particularly tariffs and potential sanctions targeting India. However, drawing on India's experiences in 1965, 1971 and 1998, he argued that historical precedents demonstrated the country's resilience in responding to external pressures. Turning to India's major-power relationships, he advocated maintaining strong ties with Russia, deepening engagement with Europe and continuing to manage relations with China. He identified the United States as the most immediate challenge and called for a combination of resilience and determination in addressing trade-related tensions.

Discussing South Asia, Ambassador Bhatia argued that India had adopted an overly defensive approach, allowing China's regional narrative to gain ground. He suggested that India's relationships with several neighbouring countries remained manageable and called for necessary policy adjustments, particularly concerning Bangladesh. On the Global South, he emphasised the need for innovative diplomatic approaches, including reconsidering Russia's place within the grouping and recognising the different international perceptions of China's role. He concluded by underscoring the close relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, arguing that national stability, political consensus and constructive dialogue were essential for sustaining an effective and independent foreign policy.



PROF. GULSHAN SACHDEVA
Centre for European Studies,
JNU

Professor Gulshan Sachdeva began by highlighting how India's sustained economic growth over the past three decades had transformed its strategic position and expanded its international engagement. He noted that India's growing economic strength had enabled it to establish numerous strategic partnerships, trade agreements and connectivity initiatives. Despite increasing geopolitical fragmentation, he observed that the global economy remained deeply interconnected, making complete economic decoupling impractical. He argued that strategic multi-engagement, rather than multi-alignment, was a more accurate description of India's foreign policy, as India sought to engage with multiple powers without formally aligning with any. Such engagement, he emphasised, was essential for securing the markets, investment and technology required to achieve India's development ambitions under Viksit Bharat 2047.

Addressing the pressures on India's strategic autonomy, Professor Sachdeva identified two important tests: India's continued purchase of Russian oil and the terms of its prospective trade agreement with the United States. While he considered India's approach to Russian oil an example of successfully maintaining independent decision-making, he suggested that negotiations with Washington would further test its commitment to strategic autonomy. Turning to the Global South, he emphasised that India's leadership aspirations must be accompanied by principled positions and meaningful cooperation. He cautioned against viewing the Global South merely as a grouping of developing economies, noting its growing economic, political and technological capabilities. He also highlighted the need to address China's position within the Global South and carefully manage India's relationship with Israel, which could affect its standing among certain developing countries.

Concluding his remarks, Professor Sachdeva stressed the importance of developing an independent Indian perspective on China and adapting foreign policy approaches to changing geopolitical realities. Referring to the earlier formulation of engaging America, managing China, cultivating Europe and reassuring Russia, he suggested that contemporary circumstances might instead require India to manage its relationship with the United States, engage more actively with China and reassess its approach towards Russia. He further identified emerging technologies and the green transition as important areas for strengthening international cooperation. Reiterating his preference for strategic multi-engagement, he emphasised that India must continue expanding its partnerships while consistently asserting its strategic autonomy.



PROF. SANJAY PANDEY
Centre for Russian and Central Asian & East European Studies, JNU

Professor Sanjay Kumar Pandey emphasised the continuity between the principles of independent foreign policy articulated before India's independence and contemporary strategic autonomy. He agreed that India's present choices were part of a longer tradition of staying out of opposing power blocs wherever possible. He then broadened the discussion by observing that India was not alone in seeking flexibility amid great-power competition. Through comparative examples, he described Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy", Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy and successive Brazilian approaches to autonomy. The Brazilian experience, in particular, suggested a movement from autonomy through distance to autonomy through participation and subsequently autonomy through diversification. These examples showed that states could preserve room for independent action by expanding their external relations and adapting their forms of engagement.

For India, Professor Pandey identified dependence as a major obstacle, especially in rare earths and critical minerals linked to Chinese supply chains. He referred to Indian efforts to build alternative mineral partnerships and institutions, including overseas mineral sourcing

initiatives and the National Critical Mineral Mission. Such practical diversification was presented as an indispensable counterpart to the political language of strategic autonomy.



DR SHWETA SINGH
Associate Professor,
South Asian University

Dr Shweta Singh began by questioning the either/or understanding of autonomy and alignment, arguing that both were integral to the architecture and fabric of India's foreign policy. Drawing on critical international relations scholarship, she described the contemporary international order as an interregnum characterised by three Cs: chaos, contestation and competition. She questioned whether the existing vocabulary of international relations, rooted in Cold War politics and colonial structures of knowledge, adequately captured the complexities of the emerging global order. To move beyond these limitations, she introduced two concepts: pluriversalism, which allows for multiple perspectives and knowledge systems, and polyphony, which offers space for global solidarity. She emphasised the need to rethink conventional frameworks and develop new spaces of engagement that reflect India's historical experiences and move beyond established disciplinary boundaries.

Turning to the Global South, Dr. Singh argued that it should be understood as a category of diverse voices rather than a monolithic bloc. She highlighted the importance of institutions such as BRICS in facilitating cooperation and alternative approaches to global governance. Drawing on feminist international relations scholarship, she also emphasised global solidarity and norm-framing around gender equality and development. She further questioned India's strategic positioning amid possible shifts in major-power relationships, including a potential US–Russia rapprochement and the evolving dynamics involving China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. Regarding South Asia, she observed that India's neighbours were also pursuing their own strategic autonomy, sometimes seeking to hedge against India itself. She therefore raised questions about reconciling India's Neighbourhood First policy with the independent priorities of neighbouring countries and highlighted the potential role of a refurbished SAARC.

Concluding her remarks, Dr. Singh cautioned against the transactional nature of US foreign policy and emphasised the need to engage with it carefully. She identified technology and critical minerals, particularly in the context of artificial intelligence, as important testing terrains for India's strategic autonomy. She also raised questions about digital non-alignment and the future of the digital economy.

Audience intervention and transition

An intervention from Dr Monish suggested that strategic autonomy should be analysed as relational rather than as a fixed national possession. Its extent depended on the particular country, issue and balance of power involved. The intervention also drew attention to the distinction between the general concepts of autonomy and alignment and their specific strategic variants. The session closed with acknowledgement of the range of arguments raised before the roundtable proceeded to its second segment.





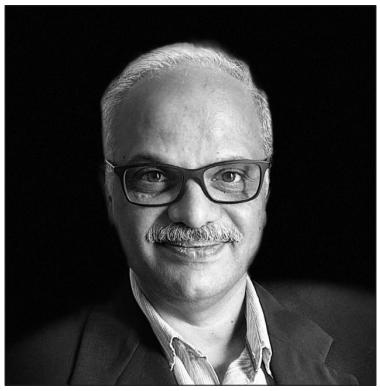
SESSION II: MULTI-ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC LEVERAGE – WHAT DOES INDIA NEED TO DO NEXT?



DR MEENA SINGH ROY
Head, West & Central Asia Centre, Tilotoma Foundation

Opening the second session, **Dr Meena Singh Roy** expressed her appreciation to the organisers and welcomed the panellists, acknowledging their expertise and her longstanding professional association with several of them. Describing the emerging international order as multi-nodal, she observed that different centres of power were navigating their relationships while pursuing their respective national interests. She emphasised that beyond debates on strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, the fundamental objective of foreign policy remained the protection and advancement of a country's strategic and economic interests.

She further highlighted the challenges posed by ongoing conflicts, trade tensions, technological competition and complexities in the maritime domain. Against this backdrop, she underscored the need to assess India's comprehensive national power and its ability to generate strategic leverage. Throughout the session, she encouraged speakers to examine India's economic strengths, strategic dependencies and the challenges posed by China's growing influence, while questioning how India could translate its existing capabilities into tangible foreign policy advantages.



PROF. RAJESH RAJAGOPALAN
Centre for International Politics, Organisations and Disarmament, JNU

Professor Rajesh Rajagopalan argued that security remained the fundamental objective of foreign policy, and that the challenge posed by China was qualitatively different from the pressures India had faced in earlier decades. Although India had grown economically, the relative disparity in power between India and China had widened. This asymmetry, he maintained, significantly limited the usefulness of treating India's choices as if they were unconstrained.

He contended that India's relationship with the United States was shaped less by preference than by the security imperative generated by China. India could strengthen its own military and economic capabilities, but, in his assessment, domestic balancing alone could not readily overcome such a large asymmetry. Strategic autonomy had costs if it was interpreted as refusing reciprocal commitments while expecting support from partners during crises.

On leverage, Professor Rajagopalan argued that influence depends on what a country is prepared to contribute to others, not simply on what it wants from them. He advocated greater coordination among states facing Chinese pressure, including on trade-related coercion. Joint responses, he suggested, could provide leverage that individual countries lacked. The larger argument was that building effective partnerships might require India to accept certain obligations rather than seek the benefits of collective action without its associated costs.



PROF. AMITA BATRA
Centre for South Asian Studies, JNU

Professor Amita Batra began by examining the changing international trading system, expressing concern over the United States' increasing reliance on trade restrictions and economic coercion. She argued that recent US trade policies were inconsistent with WTO rules and reflected structural changes unlikely to disappear with a change in administration. Disagreeing with the view that India had limited foreign policy choices, she highlighted India's trade engagements with the United Kingdom and European Union as examples of strategic flexibility. She noted that India had demonstrated a willingness to adjust its traditional positions on issues such as environment, labour and gender, although greater flexibility remained necessary.

Turning to the economic foundations of strategic autonomy, Professor Batra emphasised that trade agreements alone could not strengthen India's position without corresponding improvements in domestic manufacturing and investment. She expressed concern over the declining contribution of manufacturing, India's stagnant share in global merchandise trade and the limited realisation of its demographic dividend. While acknowledging India's growth in services and information technology, she stressed that manufacturing expansion was essential for employment and greater integration into global value chains. She further argued that trade agreements needed to be complemented by investment agreements to facilitate foreign direct investment and technology transfer.

Addressing multilateral governance, Professor Batra argued that the WTO remained relevant despite growing institutional challenges. She cautioned that India's reluctance to adopt more flexible positions could limit its influence over emerging trade rules, particularly as countries pursued plurilateral arrangements and digital trade frameworks. Turning to China, she highlighted India's difficulties in balancing economic engagement with security concerns, given China's industrial dominance, restrictions on technology sharing and existing territorial disputes. She concluded by emphasising the need to strengthen domestic capabilities, attract investment and engage more actively in shaping international economic governance.



PROF. SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI
Centre for East Asian Studies, JNU

Professor Srikanth Kondapalli began by examining the relationship between strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and strategic leverage, particularly in the context of India's relations with China. Drawing on historical examples, he highlighted how dependence on external powers for essential resources, energy and technology could undermine national security. He referred to China's concerns over its reliance on maritime routes, particularly the Malacca Strait, to illustrate the strategic vulnerabilities arising from such dependencies. In India's case, he identified energy imports, limited semiconductor manufacturing capabilities and dependence on foreign defence equipment as significant challenges. He emphasised that reducing these vulnerabilities was essential to strengthening India's strategic autonomy.

Reflecting on the historical evolution of India's strategic partnerships, Professor Kondapalli referred to the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty to illustrate how India's approach to strategic autonomy had accommodated different forms of security cooperation. He distinguished contemporary multi-alignment from formal military alliances, arguing that arrangements such as the Quad represented flexible cooperation based on shared interests rather than binding alliance commitments. He maintained that the central challenge for India was to convert its comprehensive national power into effective strategic capacity, particularly in energy resilience, defence production and emerging technologies.

Turning to policy priorities, Professor Kondapalli emphasised the need to reduce external dependencies while building on India's existing strengths in pharmaceuticals, information technology and fintech. He called for greater clarity in defining India's core national interests and strategic red lines, particularly concerning territorial sovereignty. He also advocated stronger engagement through plurilateral and minilateral groupings, expanded capacity-building programmes and deeper regional integration through connectivity and trade facilitation. Highlighting the growing importance of artificial intelligence, he proposed developing a Global South AI framework independent of dominant US and Chinese models, alongside a dedicated secretariat in India to strengthen institutional cooperation. He concluded by stressing that India's economic weight and technological capabilities must be translated into tangible strategic leverage to support its independent foreign policy choices.



PROF. UMMU SALMA BAVA
Chairperson, Centre for European Studies, JNU

Professor Ummu Salma Bava began by questioning whether the changing international order required a new lexicon of international politics. Referring to the idea of an interregnum, she observed that the ongoing systemic transition had created uncertainty, with countries experiencing its consequences differently depending on their capacities to respond. She argued that foreign policy terminology carried political significance and that the use of multi-alignment was a conscious choice reflecting India's approach to international engagement. Unlike non-alignment, which emerged from Cold War dynamics, multi-alignment conveyed an intention to engage with multiple powers. However, she emphasised that such engagement required a clearer understanding of what India could offer its partners and the political costs associated with its choices.

Examining the practical implications of multi-alignment, Professor Bava argued that strategic partnerships did not automatically translate into tangible benefits and required sustained political commitment and institutional capacity. She cautioned that asymmetrical partnerships could create new dependencies, even as countries remained deeply interconnected. She also questioned the assumption that India would automatically emerge as a leader of the Global South, particularly given China's greater ability to mobilise economic resources. Emphasising

that every foreign policy choice carries a political cost, Professor Bava highlighted the concept of 360-degree security, encompassing political, economic, energy and military dimensions. She argued that weakness in any one of these dimensions could undermine a country's overall security.

Turning to technology, Professor Bava identified indigenous technological capabilities as a decisive factor in India's future strategic autonomy. She expressed concern over dependence on foreign digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence systems, particularly the limited representation of Indian languages in large language models and the implications of externally controlled data platforms. She further argued that alignment was not a value-free choice, as every partnership involved trade-offs between autonomy, cooperation and strategic interests. Referring to the differing responses of India and Europe to the Ukraine conflict, she cautioned against rigid geopolitical divisions and emphasised the need for more flexible, shorter-term arrangements and strategic hedging. She concluded by highlighting the strain on existing multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations, and reiterated the need to rethink the vocabulary and frameworks through which contemporary international relations are understood.



COL. RAJEEV AGARWAL
Independent Senior Defence and Strategic Expert

Col. Rajeev Agarwal began by distinguishing between multi-alignment and what he described as multi-directional engagement, arguing that India engaged with multiple powers without necessarily aligning with them. He emphasised that strategic leverage came from national strength, particularly economic growth, technological capabilities and military power. Strategic autonomy, he argued, was not a fixed position or a choice that could be adopted or abandoned at will, but a continuous struggle shaped by national capabilities and the external environment. He maintained that military and economic strength were central to comprehensive national power and that India's ability to influence security developments in its own region would determine its scope for exercising greater strategic autonomy. He also drew attention to India's continued dependence on the United States, particularly in high-end technology.

Turning to West Asia, Colonel Agarwal described the region as an important example of India's independent diplomatic engagement. He highlighted India's ability to maintain relations with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates despite their competing regional interests. However, he questioned whether India was effectively utilising the leverage available through these relationships. Drawing attention to the financial implications of regional instability, he contrasted India's defence expenditure with the additional burden imposed by rising oil prices. He argued that while India was compelled to bear substantial costs to maintain energy security, it lacked sufficient resources to extend its security role in the region. He concluded that aspirations for greater global leadership must be supported by economic and military strength, as strategic autonomy could only be exercised effectively when backed by adequate national capabilities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS



DR APRAJITA KASHYAP
Associate Professor,
Centre for the Study of the Americas, JNU

Dr Aprajita Kashyap in her closing remarks, delivered on behalf of SIS and the organisers, the two central questions of the dialogue were revisited: whether autonomy and alignment were alternatives or parts of the same process, and whether India could continue to choose its own foreign policy. The sessions were interpreted as suggesting that India could retain that freedom by moving from reactive balancing towards a more proactive effort to shape its external environment.

The remarks connected the first session's emphasis on managing China, deepening cooperation with Europe, handling established relations with Russia and reinforcing the neighbourhood to the second session's emphasis on issue-based coalitions, technology transfer, supply-chain integration and leverage. They also acknowledged the lack of full consensus: speakers differed over whether constraints overshadowed India's options and over the relative importance of domestic strength and coordinated engagement. The event was therefore presented as a foundation for continuing research and more detailed policy dialogue rather than as a forum that had settled every question.



KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The roundtable discussion on "Between Autonomy and Alignment: Can India Still Choose Its Own Foreign Policy?" highlighted several policy priorities for strengthening India's strategic autonomy in an increasingly fragmented and competitive international environment. While the speakers differed in their interpretations of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and India's geopolitical choices, their interventions offered the following recommendations for consideration.

1. Strengthening domestic capabilities as the foundation of strategic autonomy

India should prioritise the development of its economic, technological and defence capabilities to reduce vulnerabilities arising from external dependencies. Greater emphasis should be placed on expanding domestic manufacturing, strengthening defence production, investing in advanced technologies and building resilient supply chains. Strategic autonomy must be supported by the material capacity to exercise independent foreign policy choices.

2. Adopt a flexible and issue-based approach to international partnerships

India should continue pursuing diversified strategic engagements without becoming excessively dependent on any single major power. Partnerships with the United States, Russia, Europe and other international actors should be guided by clearly defined national interests and evaluated according to their contribution to India's strategic capabilities. Greater emphasis should be placed on flexible, issue-based coalitions and minilateral arrangements that allow India to cooperate selectively while retaining decision-making independence.

3. Develop a comprehensive strategy for managing China

India should adopt a multidimensional approach to China that balances security concerns with the realities of economic interdependence. This requires maintaining credible deterrence, clearly defining national security priorities and territorial red lines, and strengthening domestic capabilities in sectors where dependence on China remains significant. Simultaneously, India should develop an independent understanding of China and the evolving US–China relationship rather than relying primarily on external geopolitical narratives.

4. Translate economic partnerships into tangible strategic leverage

India should ensure that trade agreements and economic partnerships contribute to domestic industrial development, technology transfer and investment. Greater attention should be given to improving manufacturing competitiveness, attracting foreign direct investment and integrating Indian industries into global value chains. India should also engage more actively in shaping international trade rules, including emerging plurilateral arrangements and frameworks for digital trade.

5. Prioritise technological sovereignty and critical supply-chain resilience

India should strengthen indigenous capabilities in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, critical minerals and digital infrastructure. Diversification of critical mineral sourcing and energy supplies should be accompanied by investments in domestic processing, research and technological innovation. Particular attention should be given to developing AI systems and digital technologies that reflect India's linguistic diversity and developmental requirements.

6. Strengthen regional engagement through the Neighbourhood First policy

India should adopt a more proactive approach towards its immediate neighbourhood by expanding connectivity, infrastructure cooperation, trade facilitation and development partnerships. Greater sensitivity to the independent strategic priorities of neighbouring countries would help strengthen regional trust and reduce

opportunities for external powers to exploit regional differences. Existing regional institutional mechanisms should also be examined for their potential to support cooperation.

7. Move from representational leadership to substantive cooperation with the Global South

India should strengthen its engagement with the Global South through technology sharing, capacity-building, development cooperation and greater institutional coordination. The proposal to establish a Global South artificial intelligence framework and a dedicated secretariat in India merits consideration as a means of advancing collaborative technological governance. India's leadership should be based on delivering practical benefits while recognising the diverse interests and priorities of developing countries.

8. Strengthen India's role in shaping international institutions and global norms

India should move beyond responding to changes in the international order towards actively contributing to the development of new global rules and institutions. This requires greater participation in discussions on reforming multilateral organisations, including the WTO and the United Nations, and a more proactive approach to emerging governance frameworks. India should also develop its own normative perspectives on international relations, reflecting its historical experiences, developmental priorities and strategic interests.

9. Improve coordination between policymakers, academia and industry

A stronger institutional framework for collaboration between government, research institutions, think tanks and industry should be developed to support evidence-based foreign policy decisions. Greater investment in area studies and interdisciplinary strategic research would strengthen India's capacity to formulate independent policy assessments. Such collaboration would also support long-term planning in technology, economic security and international negotiations.

10. Build collective leverage while preserving independent decision-making

India should explore opportunities for coordinated responses with partner countries to economic coercion, supply-chain disruptions and emerging security challenges. Collective approaches can increase negotiating leverage, particularly when individual countries face significant asymmetries with major powers. However, such cooperation should be calibrated to India's capabilities, strategic interests and willingness to undertake reciprocal commitments.



OVERALL REFLECTIONS

Despite differing perspectives and interpretations of the central theme of the roundtable, the deliberations highlighted that autonomy and alignment are not necessarily contradictory but can complement each other in foreign policy decision-making. While the speakers differed in their understanding of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and strategic multi-engagement, the discussions reflected a shared view regarding India's ability to preserve independent foreign policy choices in an increasingly uncertain international order. The dialogue also underscored that strategic autonomy cannot be sustained through diplomatic flexibility alone; it must be reinforced by economic strength, technological capabilities, institutional influence and strategic preparedness.

A central reflection emerging from the discussions was the distinction between strategic autonomy as a continuing foreign policy objective and the changing approaches adopted to achieve it. Strategic autonomy has remained a constant feature of India's foreign policy strategy. What changes in response to shifts in the international order and geopolitical circumstances is the approach adopted to implement this strategy. In the past, non-alignment served as the means of pursuing strategic autonomy, whereas today, this approach has transitioned towards multi-alignment. Thus, while strategic autonomy remains the constant, its implementation evolves according to the changing geopolitical environment.

The discussions also brought attention to the difference between having the freedom to make independent decisions and possessing the capabilities required to exercise that freedom. India's expanding international partnerships provide greater opportunities for engagement but they need to focus on further developing their capabilities. The ability to make independent choices remains closely linked to the country's economic and technological capacities, its security environment and the extent of its external dependencies. In this context, the effectiveness of multi-alignment is understood not simply through the number or diversity of partnerships but also through their contribution to strengthening India's position in the international system.

Another important reflection concerned the changing nature of international relationships themselves. The emerging world order does not necessarily require countries to choose between exclusive partnerships, yet it also does not offer unlimited freedom of choice. Economic interdependence, geopolitical competition and the growing use of trade and technology as instruments of pressure have made foreign policy decisions increasingly interconnected. India's relationships with major powers, its immediate neighbourhood and the Global South therefore need to be understood within this wider context, where cooperation and competition often coexist.

Taken together, the deliberations suggested that India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is not a question of choosing between engagement and independence, but of determining how engagement can strengthen independence while maintaining one's independent position. As the international order continues to evolve, the means of exercising strategic autonomy will also require continuous reassessment. The underlying objective, however, remains the same: preserving India's ability to make foreign policy decisions based on its national interests while developing the capabilities necessary to sustain those choices.

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