

Original Article

Civilizational Geopolitics: India's Historical Non-Alignment and Its Evolution amid Contemporary Global Conflicts

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Abstract

India's non-aligned foreign policy, which is based on its civilizational values of independence and diversity, has changed dramatically since the Cold War. This article assesses the civilizational geopolitics that underlie India's non-aligned foreign policy through an examination of the history of the philosophy and practice of non-alignment in both the past and present. It also examines India's current balancing act between maintaining good relationships with Russia, the West, and China in order to maintain India's long-standing ability to be strategically autonomous during these new and dangerous times of global conflict and multipolarity. The article uses the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine as a case study to analyze how India is currently managing its relationships with all three sides of the current global conflict, while trying to balance the geoeconomics of the war with its civilizational narratives. The article finds that India's non-aligned foreign policy has transitioned from an ideologically neutral stance to a pragmatic multi-aligned stance as a result of its ancient civilizational identity of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family), and as such, it is an example of the best way for India to increase its global influence. However, the article also identifies significant obstacles to India's ability to continue to pursue its non-aligned foreign policy, including the emerging alignment between China and Russia, as well as the imposition of economic sanctions against India by Western countries. Overall, the article concludes that by utilizing a civilizational lens to view India's non-aligned foreign policy, the article finds that India's non-aligned foreign policy will remain relevant to creating multipolar stability in today's world of continued conflict.

Keywords: Non-Alignment, Civilizational Geopolitics, Strategic Autonomy, India Foreign Policy, Russia-Ukraine War, Multi-Alignment, Indo-Russian Relations, Sino-Indian Dynamics, Western Engagements, Multipolar Order

Introduction

India's Civilizational Geopolitics And Global Positioning are about the relationship between a country's history and culture, and how this shapes its global position in terms of its engagement with other nations (Forough et al., 2023). As an example of this, India's post-independence non-alignment policy can be understood as shaped by its civilizational legacy of ahimsa (non-violence) and self-sufficiency (Dahiya & Kumar, 2024; Forough et al., 2023). The legacy of ahimsa was evident in the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated for India to resist British colonial rule using non-violent resistance, and the self-sufficiency idea can also be seen in the Upanishads, a collection of ancient Indian texts. The roots of this legacy date back to the time of British colonialism when India had no formal alliance with either the United States or the Soviet Union. This legacy of non-alignment has evolved over time to address new challenges in global politics, including the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022, and has created new and evolving alliances and economic dependencies.

Initially, the non-alignment doctrine was based upon a desire for India to remain neutral between the two superpowers during the Cold War

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but today it is interpreted as a way for India to have the freedom to evaluate global issues independently,

as opposed to passively following the lead of one or both of the great powers (Kanchana, 2023). While India remains committed to maintaining its strategic autonomy, its multi-alignment policy allows it to enter into issue-based coalitions with a variety of countries (Morales, 2025; Sisodia & Seth, 2025). The shift towards a multi-alignment policy represents a significant departure from the old non-alignment model, which is now widely viewed as being outdated (Forough et al., 2023; Morales, 2025).

The purpose of this research paper is to explore India's non-alignment policy through the lens of civilization. It will argue that India has moved away from a passive neutrality in its non-alignment, and toward a proactive multi-alignment policy, and that this new approach enables India to navigate the complexities of a multipolar world without sacrificing its sovereignty. The origins of India's non-alignment policy go back to the early days of India's struggle for independence from Britain, when India advocated for decolonization and Third World solidarity through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Today, with tensions with China, cooperation with Russia, and dialogue with the Western nations, India is adapting to the reality of sanctions and supply chain disruptions due to globalization (Forough et al., 2023).

In addition to providing a historical context for the evolution of India's non-alignment policy, the research uses historical records, government documents and other analyses of India's geopolitical situation to provide evidence for this argument. The research contributes to the understanding of how civilizational identities inform a country's global strategies. Finally, the research explores India's potential roles in a fractured world order through case studies of India's involvement in the Ukraine conflict.

Historical Roots of Non-Alignment: A Civilizational Foundation

The policy of non-alignment of India is based on India's civilization ethos and combines India's ancient philosophy with India's post-colonial goals. The policy of non-alignment is based on the Vedic principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam which states that the world is one family and hence there should be peaceful co-existence and no imperial domination (Morales, 2025). Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, formalized the policy of non-alignment in the 1950s when he co-founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) along with other leaders including Nasser of Egypt and Tito of Yugoslavia. Non-alignment gave India the flexibility to have diplomatic relations with both the

United States and the Soviet Union without being drawn into their conflicts or alliances. Non-alignment allowed India to receive economic and technological aid while at the same time providing India with independence. The policy of non-alignment also provided an opportunity for newly independent countries to assert a separate voice in the bipolar world of the Cold War and laid the ground work for India's current reconfiguring of its foreign policy — moving from simply navigating the complexities of global politics to proactively shaping the dynamics of global politics (Morales, 2025). Based upon this foundation of historical precedent, the policy of non-alignment has now developed into a policy of multi-alignment, which allows for engagement with multiple global actors while at the same time allowing India to preserve its strategic autonomy in a rapidly changing international environment (Mishra, 2023; Morales, 2025). Therefore, the transformation of non-alignment into multi-alignment represents a practical adaptation to protect and promote India's interests and values in an increasing competitive and transactional world (Hall, 2016; Morales, 2025). As a result of India's civilization history of resisting invasion by foreign powers, ranging from Alexander the Great to British colonial rule, India has historically emphasized strategic autonomy and has fostered a story line of autonomous action. India's non-alignment policy was exemplified by events such as the 1955 Bandung Conference, where India advocated for anti-imperialism and influenced the formation of a unified front among the Global South. Non-alignment was not just about maintaining equal distance from rival blocs; it was an active position, as demonstrated by India's mediation in the Korean War and its criticisms of the nuclear arms race. Non-alignment was a means through which India asserted its civilizational resilience and positioned itself as a bridge between East and West, utilizing its rich cultural diversity to advocate for the establishment of multipolarism. This unique approach to non-alignment was advocated for by several key figures, most notably Jawaharlal Nehru, who were informed by an understanding of India's civilizational identity. India's civilizational identity incorporated a wide range of philosophical and political ideas including Buddhism, Marxism, Gandhian thought and the thought of Rabindranath Tagore (Forough et al., 2023). Nehru's vision of non-alignment, therefore, went beyond a solely political strategy; instead, it incorporated a broad civilizational framework for establishing India's distinctive role in the world (Li & Li, 2023). However, while non-alignment was often framed ideologically as a form of principled foreign policy, it had a largely practical aspect —

the ability to balance relations with two powerful superpowers to achieve Indian national interests (Baru, 2020). This practical application of non-alignment ultimately led to non-alignment becoming a truly independent foreign policy, enabling India to pursue its goal of transitioning from a leader of the third world to a global power through the use of India's economic potential (Леонова & Кхатри, 2023). The historical path followed by India as it pursued strategic autonomy through a combination of idealistic and pragmatic actions demonstrates India's ongoing efforts to navigate complex and shifting global geographies (Kanchana, 2023; Morales, 2025). Nonetheless, challenges to India's non-alignment policy did arise – particularly in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, which forced India to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union for defensive support. Although this challenge represented a significant test of the limits of non-alignment, the doctrine survived, and it eventually became a tool of economic diplomacy. India used non-alignment to access development assistance without having to submit to ideological constraints. This historical context provides insight into the deep civilizational roots of India's non-alignment policy, highlighting the importance of India's moral authority rather than military force in resolving global conflict.

Evolution in the Post-Cold War Era: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

In 1991, after the end of the Cold War, there was a transformation that led to non-alignment evolving from an anti-bloc ideology to a pragmatic multi-alignment strategy. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India began to diversify partnerships, and through its economic liberalization programs, it engaged the United States. It also used nuclear agreements with the U.S. as part of its strategy; one example is the 2008 Indo-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement. These changes reflect the civilizational adaptability of India, where India has been able to combine its traditional and long-standing approach to pluralism with its modern and increasingly globalized world.

This adaptation to multi-alignment has enabled India to be part of forums that include BRICS as well as engage with Western-led organizations such as the Quad, as India seeks to counter the growing presence of China in the Indo-Pacific region (Singh & Pandey, 2025).

Geopolitically, this shift has helped India address emerging challenges, particularly those related to terrorism, which emerged in the aftermath of September 11, and the growing number of economic crises. Additionally, the civilizational narrative of India emphasizes

inclusive growth, as evidenced by its support for reforms to the structure of existing global institutions, including the UN Security Council. In terms of the policy of India, it has demonstrated its ability to adapt to regional developments and to balance its relationships with both Russia, which remains India's largest defense partner, and the West. Civilizational geopolitics in this case has included referencing historical experiences, such as the exchange of cultural activities between India and Russia, to maintain its relationships with other countries during a period of unipolar US dominance (Forough et al., 2023).

By the 2010s, the multi-alignment strategy of India had become apparent in the country's "Act East" policy, which enhanced its relationship with ASEAN and increased its focus on maritime security. At the same time, this evolution preserved the core principles of non-alignment – namely autonomy – and permitted India to develop a flexible approach to navigating the complexities of the post-Cold War international system. The civilizational aspects of the foreign policy strategy of India have included the promotion of yoga and Ayurveda globally as a means of increasing the country's soft power. In addition to these soft power initiatives, India has pursued hard power strategies in order to pursue its national interest and increase its influence in a rapidly changing international environment. Therefore, the non-alignment strategy of India evolved into a dynamic framework, and it has remained resilient to changing conditions in the international system (Morales, 2025).

Non-Alignment in Contemporary Global Conflicts: The Russia-Ukraine War Case Study

In terms of contemporary development of Non-Alignment, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is an example of the way that non-alignment can evolve to be based on both geopolitical or strategic factors and civilizational principles. In response to United Nations resolutions condemning Russia, India has chosen to abstain; India's abstention was framed as a form of "neutral mediation" rooted in the principles of ahimsa and dialogue. As such, India's stance in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is reflective of the concept of civilizational geopolitics – which emphasizes finding peaceful solutions to conflict rather than forming alliances that are adversarial in nature. Historically, India's relationship with the Soviet Union developed into very strong Indo-Russian relations, with Russia providing over 60 percent of India's military equipment and supplies. Following the imposition of Western sanctions against Russia, India significantly expanded its imports of discounted oil

from Russia and in doing so enhanced its energy security and assisted Russia in maintaining some level of economic stability (Rout & Sethy, 2023). This contemporary relationship between India and Russia is evolutionary in the sense that it represents multi-alignment. On one hand, India is strengthening ties with the West, including through efforts such as the India-EU Connectivity and Technology Initiative (iCET) to improve technology collaboration between India and the EU, at the same time, India is continuing to develop its partnership with Russia. This rationale is justified in terms of civilizational narratives that portray India as a global peacekeeper, similar to its historical role as a convenor of ancient councils of Indian states (Verma, 2023). Additionally, the war-related developments in Eurasia will have impacts on India's strategies in the Indo-Pacific region and create challenges to India's borders and maritime interests due to the emerging Sino-Russian alliance. However, India seeks to counter these emerging challenges using the framework of non-alignment and by exploiting fissures within the Sino-Russian alliance, such as when Russia pivots towards India in order to balance against China (Verma, 2023). From a geoeconomic perspective, non-alignment continues to evolve and adapt to sanctions imposed by other countries and promote alternatives such as rupee-ruble trade, and utilize multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), etc. While this practical adaptation to sanctions imposed by other countries allows India to maintain its sovereignty and independence in the context of ongoing conflict, India's use of non-alignment is criticized by Western countries. Nonetheless, India's civilizational geopolitics justifies its position as a moral alternative to bloc politics, thereby enhancing its leadership among developing nations in the Global South (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). This type of positioning enables India to not only address its immediate economic and security needs but also to position itself as a major voice for developing nations in the international arena (Morales, 2025).

Civilizational Dimensions and Challenges in Modern Geopolitics

In addition to geo-strategic dimensions, civilizational geopolitics gives "non-alignment" a cultural dimension, making India a "civilizational state" that emphasizes harmony rather than hegemony, particularly in conflict situations such as Ukraine, which has generated a call to diplomacy based on the principles of non-violence that are rooted in Buddhism and Hinduism. Civilizational geopolitics is an evolutionary counter-narrative to the idea of "the clash of civilizations," as suggested

by Huntington, by promoting inclusiveness (Long, 2021).

India's challenge lies in the fact that there is an ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry, with China being an aggressive civilizationist and India being a pluralistic civilizationist. Russia and China's increasingly close ties, as a result of the Ukraine War, also present an additional challenge to India's pluralistic approach to civilizationism. Therefore, to address these challenges, India's non-aligned policy will evolve through developing alternative network structures that combine the elements of civilizational connectivity with India's strategic requirements, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and India's ability to withstand pressure from the West to align itself with other states' geopolitical interests (Verma, 2023) while India's civilizational narrative provides legitimacy to its continued pursuit of strategic autonomy. This approach can be expected to develop in the future in areas such as the digital and space domains, where India's use of civilizational soft power will provide leverage in enhancing its hard power capabilities; ultimately contributing to the continued relevance of India's non-aligned policy in response to emerging conflicts, while maintaining India's global ethos (Verma, 2023).

Implications for Global Order and Future Trajectories

In terms of how India's evolving non-alignment impacts our understanding of the emerging multipolar world, there are some important implications. On one hand, the emergence of multipolarity means that states such as India are going to have a greater say in what happens in the world and therefore reduces the risk associated with a bipolar world order. On the other hand, India's emerging role as a multipolar state and its role as a "civilizational state" will require it to be able to navigate the complexities of multiple alliances and interests. The non-aligned movement will continue to foster dialogue in conflict situations, as evidenced by India's G20 Presidency promoting unity in the face of challenges. This is likely to have two main implications – sanctions will be less effective and there will be more solidarity among countries of the Global South (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). Non-alignment may also contribute to a more even distribution of global power and challenge the traditional western-centric models of International Relations (Forough et al., 2023). The concept of non-alignment is based on the idea of achieving strategic autonomy through independence in foreign policy decisions. As such, India has positioned itself as a strong independent

voice in international affairs that can help promote peace and stability (Bhardwaj, 2024). Therefore, this strategic posture is essential for India to deal with the complex global issues and realities including economic considerations, humanitarian concerns and transnational threats in today's interconnected world (Singai et al., 2023). Additionally, India's diplomatic engagement based on its commitment to strategic autonomy and non-alignment represents a nuanced approach to international politics, and provides a framework for building partnership and finding peaceful resolution to international disputes (Bhardwaj, 2024; Kanchana, 2023).

Non-alignment in the future will also need to be integrated with new hybrid forms of threat, such as cyber and economic, which will be guided by India's approach to civilizational geopolitics, focusing on long-term sustainable development in a context of climate-related conflicts. Policymakers will need to develop the ability to operate within multiple alliance systems to mitigate potential risks associated with emerging alignment patterns, such as those between China and Russia.

Conclusion

Indian non-alignment, based on civilizational geopolitical ideas, has transitioned from Cold War neutrality to "multi-alignment" and successfully navigated current conflicts such as the Ukraine conflict. The ability of India to adapt to these changes has helped preserve its sovereignty and balance competing power interests while contributing to increased global stability. In an increasingly multipolar world, India's civilizational geopolitical narrative will continue to maintain its relevance, ultimately enabling India to become one of the primary actors in future global conflicts. Therefore, Indian foreign policy should be developed with the goal of continuing this trend toward robust diplomatic actions.

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