

## Original Article

# Critical Geopolitics Perspective: Media, Discourse, and the Construction of India's Foreign Policy Choices during the Ukraine War

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### Abstract

From a Critical Geopolitics view, Foreign Policy is not only based upon rational choice but upon constructed discourse that is influenced by Media, Power Relations, and Geographical Imaginaries. This Paper looks at how Media and Discourse practices were instrumental in shaping India's Foreign Policy post the beginning of the Ukraine War in February 2022 through Strategic Autonomy and Neutrality Narratives. The paper uses Critical Geopolitics Theory to examine how both International and Indian media constructs the contested zones and arenas of geopolitical space - Eurasia as a contested zone and the Indo-Pacific as an arena for balance - in shaping India's decision to abstain from U.N. voting and its continued relationship with Russia despite Western Sanctions. Major Findings indicate that Discourses of Multipolarity and Solidarity among the Global South legitimized India's foreign policy choices, and thus countered Western Hegemonic Narratives and facilitated India's Sino-Russian alignment; however, Media Framings also revealed Tensions such as Perceptions of Opportunistic Energy Deals. The Study further posits that the discursive constructions used in this research project enhance India's Agency in a multipolar world system and contribute to critical geopolitics by illustrating the role that Media plays in the formation of policy when conflict exists. This Analysis offers insight into how Discourse mediates Geopolitical Realities for Emerging Powers.

**Keywords:** Critical Geopolitics, Media Discourse, Foreign Policy Construction, Ukraine War, Strategic Autonomy, Narrative Framing, Multipolar Order, Global South, Eurasian Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific Balancing

### Introduction

The media plays a vital part in the discursively constructed representation of India's relations with the West and Russia, and in this manner has assisted in the construction of policy as well as India's geopolitical agency. The media frames the Eurasian space as the ground of confrontation between Russia and the West; and conversely, represents the Indian Ocean as India's area of interest vis-a-vis China. The present paper analyzes these dynamics and argues that media-driven discourses have contributed to construct India's foreign policy, creating an opportunity for India to act geographically as an emerging power in a multipolar world, but at the same time revealing a situation of power asymmetry. Discourse analysis of a wide range of media materials (newspaper articles, television reports etc.), governmental declarations and policy papers are employed in this research. The results of this research will contribute to the development of new theoretical models for the analysis of the geopolitical strategies employed by emerging powers in relation to global conflicts and their use of narrative strategies. These models will be useful for studying the effects of a multipolarization of geopolitics in the years to come.

In addition to critical geopolitics, other relevant theories include postcolonialism, poststructuralist theory, and postmodern geography. Postcolonialism examines the ongoing legacy of colonialism and imperialism and seeks to reveal the hidden or marginalized aspects of *Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)*

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these processes. Poststructuralist theory, especially as developed by Michel Foucault, examines the ways in which social structures and institutions produce knowledge and power. Postmodern geography critiques the notion of objectivity in geography and challenges traditional notions of identity and culture. The intersection of all three can provide a powerful lens for analyzing how media discourses reflect and help to create the social and cultural environments in which political decisions take place.

Finally, there are a number of methodological approaches available to researchers interested in examining how media discourses influence public opinion and policy making. These include content analysis of newspapers and television news programs, surveys and focus groups, case studies of specific events, and ethnographic analyses of media institutions and their practices.

#### **Background: Critical Geopolitics and Discourse in Foreign Policy**

Media is a critical location in constructing discourses of geopolitical reality. Discourses are created and reproduced through social construction of the geographical space that produce geopolitical realities. Tuathail & Agnew (1992) discuss the role of media in creating narratives that legitimize geopolitical policy choices and spatial imaginations. Indian discourse has created a multipolar world, one that rejects such binaries, allowing India to maintain its strategic flexibility and be able to interact with multiple global actors without adhering to strict ideological positions (Verma, 2023; Ogden, 2023). India also maintains its ability to resist Western "moral outrage" due to its historical skepticism of Western hypocrisy surrounding their own colonial legacies, and thus continues to remain non-committal regarding Russia's actions in Ukraine (Forough et al., 2023). Through discourse analysis and the lens of Foucauldian theory, the way in which power relations become embedded in language and therefore influence the creation of foreign policy as a performative act can be explored. India's past of non-aligned foreign policy has evolved into multi-aligned foreign policy through discourses of sovereignty and pragmatism, influenced by media portrayals of historical connections with Russia and increasing perceived threats from China. The discourse of the Ukraine conflict consists of a variety of different perspectives, including Russian narratives of de-Nazification, Western sanctions, and Chinese "no limits" partnership, each interacting with India's positioning within the global system, and provides the necessary context to study how media and discourse shape India's

options and highlights the emphasis placed by critical geopolitics on challenging the dominant narratives.

#### **India's Foreign Policy Discourse on the Ukraine War**

India has developed an official discourse that represents the Ukraine/Russia war as a humanitarian crisis that requires dialogue rather than condemnation — creating a geopolitical space in which neutrality equals wisdom. Statements made by Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, who have said, "This is not an era of war" — referencing civilizational narratives of peace — are examples of how leaders can use their words to legitimize their decision to abstain from taking sides. The critical geopolitics literature points out that this is also a counter-hegemonic discourse to Western hegemony, with India representing itself as a Global South advocate against neo-colonial intervention in the region (Forough et al., 2023). This approach demonstrates India's commitment to strategic autonomy, allowing India to negotiate international relationships that are both complex and contradictory, thereby demonstrating India's commitment to being seen as a responsible global actor (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023; Ravikumar & Downey, 2024). Furthermore, the media in India supports this ambiguous stance by regularly highlighting India's historical ties with Russia, and portraying criticisms by the West as hypocritical, and therefore supporting public backing of India's foreign policy choices (Oktaviani, 2023; Ravikumar & Downey, 2024). The media also contributes to this — Indian news organizations, such as the Hindustan Times, frame India's foreign policy as a way to achieve "strategic autonomy in action," by framing the Eurasian conflict as distant but economically opportunistic due to oil deals. Discursively, this creates an image of Russia as a reliable partner in a multipolar world — one in which unilateral sanctions are portrayed as violations of norms. In addition to media outlets, government documents — such as MEA briefings — create metaphors of "balance" to spatialize policy, creating the image of India as a bridge between the East and the West (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). Although this may be an effective way to create an image of India, there are internal contradictions in this type of discourse. For example, the idea of self-reliance in policy creation conflicts with defense dependencies, revealing the power dynamics at play in policy development. From a critical perspective, this type of discourse disrupts traditional forms of geopolitics by emphasizing India's agency in shaping its own narrative — and the way this type of narrative

helps to legitimate India's pragmatic approach to international relations, and particularly its ongoing relationship with Russia, as a way to pursue national interests and maintain strategic autonomy in a complex global environment (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023; Ravikumar & Downey, 2024). Ultimately, the ability of India to shape its own narrative in a flexible manner will allow India to develop multiple partnerships simultaneously — such as developing closer ties to Western nations, while continuing to develop its long-standing strategic relationship with Russia, a key component for its defense needs (Verma, 2024).

### Media Representations and Narrative Construction

The way in which India's foreign policy options are shaped by media representation is an important part of how both domestic and international discourse combine to define India's policy positions. The ways in which NDTV for example, uses visuals of Modi meeting with Putin to tell the story of India's solidarity without alignment, constructs a geopolitical imaginary of Eurasia as a mutually beneficial zone of cooperation — one that supports "energy wins" amid a global energy shortage (Verma, 2023). In addition, Western media, like the BBC, frequently criticize India as "Russia's enabler," utilizing orientalist discourse to render India's non-Western actions invisible or marginalized. As a response, India's diplomatic corps utilizes social media campaigns to frame their foreign policy as multipolar realism. Chinese media, including the Global Times, represents India's decisions ambiguously; they recognize India's ability to make its own autonomous decision but also warn India about being trapped by Western interests — this reinforces the discourses of Sino-Indian rivalry. Russia's media outlets represent India positively and construct India as a counter-weight to China, and therefore support Russia's narrative of pivoting toward Asia (Muraviev et al., 2021). Critical geopolitics can be used to highlight how these constructions of India's policy position spatially configure conflict: media constructs Eurasia as fractured, and therefore creates a space for India to pursue an Indo-Pacific strategy as a discursively constructed escape from the fracturing Eurasia. Media therefore has a significant role in shaping policy by either supporting or contesting official policy discourse and influences the perceptions of both elites and the public. There are challenges to developing a strong counter-narrative, one of the largest of which includes disinformation, where viral narratives distort India's image, requiring

India to develop effective counter-discourse strategies.

### Discourse in Relations with Key Powers

The rhetoric surrounding India's relationships with Russia emphasizes India's historical and ongoing friendship with Russia, which creates a shared space to justify continued cooperation against colonialism and other global challenges. The media also presents India-Russia collaborative projects as part of creating a "connectivity hub" for Eurasia, thus providing an alternative to isolationist narratives. Critical geopolitical analyses have shown that this is an example of how India utilizes discursive strategies to utilize power in order to gain concessions from Russia — i.e., low-cost oil — while simultaneously using media to legitimize India's pragmatic decisions to increase imports of Russian hydrocarbons, regardless of the pressure from the international community (Bhagwat & Rogachev, 2025). Additionally, India's discourses regarding its relationship with the West reflect both a sense of partnership and a desire for independence and autonomy. For example, in response to the criticism that India has been accused of being a "fence sitter", Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar has countered those criticisms in the media. As such, media portrayals of the U.S.-India bilateral relationship emphasize the "Indo-Pacific synergy" between the two countries and downplay the differences between the United States and India over Ukraine. Nevertheless, the West continues to apply pressure on India to conform to its expectations and condemn Russia, as it frames India's refusal to do so as a moral failure. Therefore, India's diplomatic strategy involves balancing the competing narratives from each side by emphasizing India's sovereignty and the ability to pursue a foreign policy that reflects India's national interests — particularly when it comes to energy security and maintaining strategic relationships (Unnikrishnan & Kapoor, 2023; Ogden, 2023). Additionally, India's domestic media portrays India's increasingly assertive foreign policy as evidence of India's growing stature as an independent actor on the global stage, able to pursue its own agenda amidst the increasing competition for influence and prestige between major powers. In contrast, India's discourses with China are highly competitive. India's media emphasizes the Sino-Russian alliance as a threat to India's encircled position and provides legitimacy for India's pivot to the West. On the other hand, China views India's actions as inconsistent and uses border disputes with India to delegitimize India's neutral positioning in the Sino-Russian conflict.

Through critical geopolitical lenses, we see that the competing discourses are actually a struggle for control over spatial representations, as India attempts to present itself as a crucial balancer in multipolar Asia. Overall, these relational discourses help construct India's policy, but at the same time reveal the power asymmetries embedded within the dominant global narratives.

### Implications and Challenges for India's Geopolitical Positioning

Strengthened multipolarity is implied by these; positioning India as an autonomous model of the Global South as an example to other countries in forums such as the G-20. The constructions of the media provide India with enhanced agency and help to diminish Western hegemony through alternative narratives. However, there are risks involved that stem from inconsistencies in discourse, such as when India's economic opportunity clashes with India's humanitarian rhetoric it can risk India's credibility. Additionally, Sino-Russian cooperation has amplified this situation and could isolate India via joint discourses (Kapoor, 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of "multi-alignment" or "strategic autonomy" while presented as a sophisticated means of balancing competing interests, often hides the underlying vulnerabilities and strategic trade-offs India will have to make within a rapidly fragmenting global order (Park, 2025; Kara, 2025). Therefore, this approach requires careful consideration of competing interests and a strategic use of media and diplomatic outlets to present a consistent national image and foreign policy narrative (Verma, 2023; Kara, 2025). Critical geopolitics' implications of these indicate a need for reflexive discourse, which seeks to deconstruct the biases in media representations. Digital media can be used as a tool for maintaining narrative control in future trajectory development, and adapting to hybrid warfare. Discourse can also be used by policymakers to mitigate the challenges posed by conflicting narratives, and ensure that coherent construction of national identity occurs during evolving conflict situations.

### Conclusion

Media and Discourse through a Critical Geopolitics perspective significantly affected the direction of India's Foreign Policy options regarding the Ukraine War, creating multiple narratives around India's autonomy to increase its status as an emerging player in the multipolar world order. Through a critical analysis of how media and discourse construct the narrative of India's autonomy, this paper identifies the ways that power is embedded in the Imaginaries of

Global Politics and provides insight into the ways that emerging players can engage with the world. Ultimately, as conflict continues, the most important factor will be to continue to refine the use of Discourse to maintain and protect the Agency of Emerging Players.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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