نشریه علمی-پژوهشی
مطالعات کشورها
شاپای الکترونیکی: ۹۱۹۳-۲۹۸۰
دانشکده مطالعات جهان

رهنامهٔ خودمختاری راهبردی هند در شرایط گسترش شرقی ناتو و مناقشهٔ اوکراین

آنبو سوبرامانیان هاریهاران[1]، موروگان شانموگاساندارام[2]، کوتالانکا آمارندرا[3]، چوکالینگرام تیرومال آژاگان[4]، آسیل اسمرات[5]، رامادوس دیویا رانجانی[6]، سودهاکار سنگان[7]*

۱. گروه مدیریت بازرگانی، مؤسسهٔ علم و فناوری SRM (یادمان سری راماسوامی)، راماپورام، چنای، ۶۰۰۰۸۹، تامیل نادو، هند.
۲. گروه مطالعات مدیریت، کالج مهندسی والیامای SRM کاتانکولاتور، چنای، ۶۰۳۲۰۳، تامیل نادو، هند.
۳. گروه علوم و مهندسی کامپیوتر، بنیاد آموزشی کونرو لاکشمایا، وادسوارام، ۵۲۲۵۰۲، آندرا پرادش، هند.
۴. گروه مطالعات مدیریت، پردیس دانشگاه آنا، تیروچیراپالی، ۶۲۰۰۲۴، تامیل نادو، هند.
۵. مرکز تحقیقات علمی کاربردی حورانی، دانشگاه الاهلیه امان، امان، ۱۹۳۲۸، اردن.
۶. کالج مهندسی ساویتا،ناندلام، چنای، تامیل نادو، هند.
۷. گروه علوم و مهندسی کامپیوتر، کالج مهندسی ارود سنگانتارا، ارود، ۶۳۸۰۵۷، تامیل نادو، هند.

مشخصات مقاله

مقالهٔ پژوهشی
موضوع: اقتصاد
حوزهٔ موضوعی: هند، روسیه، اوکراین، ناتو

تاریخ دریافت: ۱۴۰۵/۰۳/۳۰
تاریخ بازنگری: ۱۴۰۵/۰۵/۲۰
تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۴۰۵/۰۵/۳۱
تاریخ انتشار: ۱۴۰۵/۰۶/۱۱

واژگان کلیدی:
پوشش‌دهی راهبردی محدودشده از نظر مادی،
چندهم‌سویی،
خودمختاری راهبردی،
ردیابی فرایند،
سیاست خارجی هند،
گسترش ناتو،
مناقشهٔ اوکراین.

چکیده

هدف این پژوهش بررسی واکنش هند به وضعیت شکل گرفته میان روسیه و اوکراین در بستر گسترش حضور ناتو به‌سمت شرق بوده است. هند تصمیم گرفته است، ضمن حفظ مسیرهای ارتباطی با مسکو و کی‌یف، از اعمال تحریم‌های غرب علیه روسیه اجتناب کند. بر اساس استدلال مطرح در این پژوهش، عبارت «پوشش‌دهی راهبردی محدودشده از نظر مادی» مناسب‌ترین تعبیر برای توصیف این رفتار است. از این منظر، هند می‌کوشید با محدودکردن مخاطرات در چارچوب محدودیت‌های مادی که احتمال رفع آن در آیندهٔ نزدیک لندک بود، از خودمختاری راهبردی خود صیلنت کند. از منظر روش‌شناسی، این پژوهش طرح کیفی تک‌موردی تودرتو محسوب می‌شود. در تحلیل، از روش‌شناسی ردیابی فرایند در آزمون نظریه‌ها و پیگیری پیامدهای آن استفاده شد. با این روش، تبیین بر مبنای محدودیت‌های مادی در برابر دو تبیین رقیب، یعنی دیدگاه میراث ایده‌ای و دیدگاه فرصت‌های تجاری، بررسی شد تا مشخص شود آیا تصمیم هند دربارهٔ اعمال تحریم‌ها تحت تأثیر محدودیت‌های دفاعی، انرژی یا ژئوپلیتیکی است؟ تحلیل پژوهش بر بیانیه‌های دولتی، داده‌های مربوط به آرای هند در سازمان ملل متحد، آمار واردات انرژی و انتقال تسلیحات، انتشارات دانشگاهی و ارزیابی‌های عینی سیاستی استوار است. بااین‌حال، شواهد بیشتر مؤید تبیین مبتنی‌بر محدودیت‌های مادی است. شواهد حمایت مستقیم از دو عامل آسیب‌پذیری دفاعی و مواجهه با هزینه‌های انرژی را نشان داد، اما حمایت از عامل ژئوپلیتیکی مرتبط با چین تنها مشروط است. بخش‌های مهمی از الگوی تجربی بررسی‌شده با نظریه‌های رقیب نیز تبیین‌پذیر است؛ بااین‌حال، با این نظریه‌ها به‌تنهایی نمی‌توان تصمیم گسترده‌تر هند را توجیه کرد. به نظر می‌رسد هند، به‌جای اتخاذ موضعی بی‌طرفانه یا هم‌سویی با روسیه، از طریق چندهم‌سویی در صدد پوشش خطرها و حفظ گزینه‌های راهبردی خود بوده است. بر اساس استدلال مطرح در این مقاله، هند از خودمختاری راهبردی محدود اما کارکردی برخوردار است. بقای بلندمدت این کشور بر سه ستون اصلی استوار است: کاهش آسیب‌پذیری در حوزه‌های دفاعی و انرژی؛ تقویت ظرفیت‌های داخلی؛ و مقابله با فشارهای اقتصادی و ژئوپلیتیکی خارجی. بحران اوکراین نشان داد خودمختاری راهبردی کشور، در نهایت به مانورپذیری دیپلماتیکی و توان‌مندی‌های مادی زیربنایی آن بستگی دارد.

ارجاع به این مقاله: هاریهاران آ، شانموگاساندارام م، آمارندرا ک، آژاگان چ، اسمرات آ، رانجانی ر، سنگان س. (؟؟؟؟). «رهنامهٔ خودمختاری راهبردی هند در شرایط گسترش شرقی ناتو و مناقشهٔ اوکراین». *مطالعات کشورها*. ؟(؟): ۱- ۳۳. doi: https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2026.416978.1576.

وبگاه: https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/ | رایانامه: jcountst@ut.ac.ir
شاپای الکترونیکی: ۹۱۹۳- ۲۹۸۰ | ناشر: دانشگاه تهران

* نویسندهٔ مسئول: sudhakars@esec.ac.in، https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4901-1432

The Faculty of World Studies
University of Tehran
Journal of
Countries Studies
EISSN: 2980-9193

India's strategic autonomy doctrine amid NATO's eastern enlargement and the Ukraine conflict

Anbu Subramanian Hariharan[1], Murugan Shunmugasundaram[2], Kothalanka Amarendra[3], Chockalingam Thirumal Azhagan[4], Aseel Smerat[5], Ramadoss Divya Ranjani[6], Sudhakar Sengan[7]*

1. Department of Commerce, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Ramapuram, Chennai, 600089, Tamil Nadu, India.
2. Department of Management Studies, SRM Valliammai Engineering College Kattankulathur, Chennai, 603203, Tamil Nadu, India.
3. Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation, Vaddeswaram, 522502, Andhra Pradesh, India.
4. Department of Management Studies, Anna University-BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli, 620024, Tamil Nadu, India.
5. Hourani Center for Applied Scientific Research, Al-Ahliyya Amman University, Amman 19328, Jordan.
6. Saveetha Engineering College, Thandalam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.
7. Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Erode Sengunthar Engineering College, Erode, 638057, Tamil Nadu, India.

Article Info

Original Article

Main Object: Economics
Scope: India, Russia, Ukraine, NATO

Received: 20 June 2026
Revised: 11 August 2026
Accepted: 22 August 2026
Published online: 02 September 2026

Keywords:
India foreign policy, materially constrained hedging, multi-alignment, NATO enlargement, process tracing, strategic autonomy, Ukraine conflict.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate India's response to the situation that has arisen between Russia and Ukraine against the backdrop of the expansion of NATO's eastern presence. India has decided to maintain communication channels with Moscow and Kyiv while also evading sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. According to our argument, the phrase "materially constrained hedging" is the most appropriate way to represent this behavior. Because of this, India was making an effort to protect its strategic autonomy by limiting risks within the context of material restrictions that were not likely to be rectified in the near future. Additionally, a single-case embedded qualitative design is applied within the methods phase of the study. In the analysis, a methodology is used to test theories and track their repercussions. It tests the material-constraint argument against two alternative explanations, the ideational-legacy perspective and the commercial-opportunity perspective, to determine whether India’s decision to impose sanctions was driven by defense, energy, or geopolitical constraints. The analysis is based on government statements, United Nations voting data, statistics on energy imports and arms transfers, academic publications, and objective policy evaluations. Some of the results offer support for the competing explanations. The evidence is supportive of the material-constraining explanation. There is immediate support for defense vulnerability and energy cost exposure, but only conditional support for the geopolitical factor related to China. There are significant parts of the experimental pattern that the competing theories do explain. On their own, they do not provide sufficient justification for the broader decision. India appears to be hedging its bets through multi-alignment rather than taking a neutral stance or aligning itself with Russia. India, according to the article, has limited but functional strategic autonomy. The country’s long-term survival depends on three pillars: reducing its vulnerability to defense and energy; strengthening domestic capacity; and confronting external economic and geopolitical pressures. The Ukrainian crisis has shown that a country's strategic autonomy depends, ultimately, on its diplomatic maneuverability and underlying material capabilities.

Cite this article: Hariharan A, Shunmugasundaram M, Amarendra K, Thirumal Azhagan C, Smerat A, Divya Ranjani R, Sengan S. (????). “India's strategic autonomy doctrine amid NATO's eastern enlargement and the Ukraine conflict”. *Countries Studies*. ?(?): 1-33. doi: https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2026.416978.1576.

Website: https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/ | Email: jcountst@ut.ac.ir |
EISSN: 2980-9193
Publisher: University of Tehran

* Corresponding author: sudhakars@esec.ac.in , https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4901-1432.

1. Introduction

The eastward development of NATO and the Russia-Ukraine war have reintroduced crucial questions into the international relations agenda. The key problems are non-Western state autonomy, alliance politics, territorial security, and great-power rivalry in a polarizing order. Since the Cold War ended, NATO has expanded from 16 members in 1991 to 32, with Finland and Sweden joining in 2023 and March 7, 2024, respectively. The alliance justifies this enlargement in accordance with the open-door principle of Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Russia has consistently perceived the identical eastward movement as a direct threat to its security. The debate regarding the significance of enlargement has been one of the most persistent tensions in the post-Cold War European security order (NATO, 2024).

That long-standing institutional dispute turned into an acute geopolitical crisis with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. NATO took a hard line in the east, Finland and Sweden ditched decades of military non-alignment to join the alliance, and the gulf between Russia and the West deepened. The war's effects reached far beyond Europe. The war upended energy markets, food supply chains, defense procurement and sanctions policy. It also meant that states across the Global South had to choose sides in an increasingly polarized international system. For states outside the Euro-Atlantic region, the conflict made non-alignment itself a controversial and costly option.

Strategic autonomy is the doctrine that guided how India responded. India did not support Russia's military action, but at the same time it did not join Western sanctions and did not follow the diplomatic language that the United States and Europe preferred. Instead, India called for dialogue and diplomacy. It abstained in several United Nations votes and kept the communication open with Moscow and Kyiv. India also continued to raise sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the principles of international law. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine in August 2024, India and Ukraine restated their respect for international law, the United Nations Charter, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024a).

India's position has received both praise and brickbats. The debate can now be read in two different ways. The first explanation describes India's pragmatic neutrality, which is based on the country's interests and functions as a balancing act that can be justified in a fragmented order. The second reading identifies it as a normative inconsistency. India professes to support a rules-based order, but it does not condemn a state that has violated another state's sovereignty. The gap is clearly illustrated by its refusal to bow to Western pressure. Recent scholarship has framed this tension in yet another way. The tension between India's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy and its growing partnership with the United States is highlighted (Thakkar, 2024). Each reading gets at something real, but each is incomplete. None of them explain how to integrate material dependence, threat perception, energy security, positioning in the Global South, and resistance to bloc alignment into a single decision.

This paper claims that India's behavior is best described as materially constrained hedging. India's strategic diplomatic autonomy is real and visible in its abstentions, its humanitarian engagement, and its outreach to rival power centers at the same time. But this independence is dependent on structural dependence. India depends on Russia for its defense platforms and discounted Russian crude for its energy security. The constraint is the pivot around which the competing readings revolve. From New Delhi's viewpoint, the same behavior is principled autonomy, and from the Western viewpoint, normative inconsistency. The reason for this is that both of them describe the same fact. It is a state that has genuine diplomatic leeway, but it is constrained by hard material limits that it did not choose and from which it cannot easily escape. In this sense, India's policy regarding Ukraine is neither a passive neutrality nor a covert alignment with Russia. The activity, on the other hand, is a measured exercise of autonomy, working with material pressure that can be measured.

Here are three questions for further research.

RQ 1. How have the eastern enlargement of NATO and the conflict in Ukraine impacted the external conditions that India utilizes to demonstrate its strategic autonomy?

RQ 2. Is the specific combination of material and geopolitical constraints explain India's decision to refrain from joining Western sanctions while simultaneously maintaining engagement with Russia and Ukraine? Also, is it possible to attribute this decision to these constraints rather than to ideological or dispositional alternatives?

RQ 3. Under what circumstances does materially constrained hedging continue to be viable, and at what point does the constraint become sufficiently tight to undermine the autonomy that it is intended to safeguard?

This article makes a three-fold contribution. The analytical part substitutes vague concepts of autonomy, hedging and multi-alignment with one justifiable statement. It supports this claim with a coherent theoretical framework grounded in the logic of balance-of-threat and realism. This argument is empirically tested in the methodological section with an embedded qualitative single-case design and a theory-testing process tracing. As the main decision episode, it examines India's decision not to join Western sanctions while it was buying more Russian crude. It weighs the constraint explanation against the ideational and the economic alternatives. In the practical part, it works out the scope conditions under which India's autonomy remains credible. It also outlines the diversification steps needed to maintain this autonomy.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and develops the theoretical model. Section 3 sets out the research methodology, distinguishes the historical, causal, and prospective components of the design, and states the observable implications of the article's causal propositions. Section 4 examines NATO's eastern enlargement and the deterioration of Russia–West relations as antecedent conditions shaping the shock created by the 2022 war and the sanctions regime that followed. Section 5 presents the central case, using within-case causal tracing to examine India's Ukraine response as materially constrained hedging. Section 6 examines India's multi-vector diplomacy as constraint-management. Section 7 discusses the findings against the theoretical model and the two rival readings. Section 8 derives scope conditions and develops future scenarios, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Literature review and theoretical model

2.1. From non-alignment to strategic autonomy

The article’s key concept is that of strategic autonomy. The term refers to the ability of the state to make independent decisions in the spheres of defense procurement, energy security, economic partnerships, and crisis diplomacy without binding subordination to any single alliance bloc. Within the framework of Indian foreign policy, “Recent academic research reads it as an extension of a long-standing Indian effort to retain policy space in an unequal international order, now adapted to a more multipolar and competitive environment” (Zajączkowski & Pulami, 2025).

The doctrine is a flexible mode of practice that is subject to change based on the distribution of power, a state's material vulnerabilities, and the level of external pressure. It descends from Nehruvian non-alignment. Non-alignment took shape during the Cold War, when India stayed outside the Soviet-led and United States-led blocs on grounds that were anti-colonial, developmental, and above all concerned with avoiding entanglement in superpower rivalry. Formal non-membership still allowed considerable closeness to one side, and India's relationship with the Soviet Union deepened over time, particularly after 1971. Strategic autonomy preserves the older commitment to independent decision-making while emphasizing pragmatic, issue-specific engagement over the explicitly ideological language of the Cold War. It continues to carry normative commitments to sovereignty, multipolarity, and institutional reform. Under this logic India has deepened defence and technology ties with the United States while sustaining its relationship with Russia, engaged Europe on trade and climate, and participated in BRICS, the SCO, and the Quad, holding each short of exclusive commitment (Basit et al., 2026; Mishra, 2023), characterises this transition as a move from non-alignment to multi-alignment, in which autonomy is pursued through engagement with many partners at once.

The Russia-Ukraine war has brought back scholarly attention to this evolved doctrine. Verma and Brosig (2024) describe the response of the Global South with the concept of "non-alignment 2.0". In this concept, developing states use strategic autonomy to pursue their geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic interests as far as possible, while refusing full alignment with either Western or non-Western blocs (Patil et al., 2026). India fits this concept closely. It combines Global South positioning, defence dependence, energy pragmatism and diplomatic caution. Verma and Brosig also point to coherence problems inside non-alignment 2.0. This article builds on that point, and it locates one source of the tension in the collision between normative commitments, like sovereignty and territorial integrity, and material constraints. Both rival readings of India's policy register this same collision, and each one registers it from an opposite side.

2.2. An ordered framework

The concepts of realism, balance of threat, interdependence, hedging and multi-alignment are common in the literature. In many studies, these concepts are used together, almost as if they all mean the same behaviour. This article takes a different approach and gives each concept its own function. The functions are arranged in a framework of four levels, which move from the structural level to the operational level. The article also stays clear about what each of these levels claims (Nanda et al., 2026; Niroula et al., 2025; Hussain et al., 2026).

At the structural level, realism establishes why security, freedom of action, and vulnerability to external dependence matter to states operating in an anarchic system with no central guarantor of survival. Realism is compatible with alliance formation, as NATO itself demonstrates, and so it does not on its own dictate non-alignment. What it supplies is the incentive structure within which India weighs the costs of alignment, the risks of dependence, and the value of strategic flexibility. Which of these India should prioritize depends on its particular strategic circumstances (Win et al., 2025; Niroula et al., 2026; Sarvalingam et al., 2026; Jayaweera et al., 2026).

At the second level, balance-of-threat theory (Walt, 1987) refines the structural picture by distinguishing threat from power. States balance against threat, understood as a function of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and perceived intent. On these dimensions, China is the most salient great-power threat in India's strategic environment. Balance-of-threat logic therefore generates an expectation that India will evaluate its Ukraine policy partly through the policy's consequences for the regional balance against China. One possible implication is an incentive to preserve functional relations with

Moscow to avoid consolidating Russia's dependence on Beijing. Whether that mechanism actually shaped Indian decision-making is a proposition the empirical case examines; balance-of-threat theory supplies the hypothesis, not the finding (Midhunchakkaravarthy et al., 2026; Yang & Rosli, 2026; Bibi et al., 2025).

At the third level, asymmetric interdependence specifies the material mechanism through which external relationships constrain policy choice; Keohane and Nye (1977) separate sensitivity from vulnerability. Sensitivity is the cost that a relationship puts on a state before the state adapts. Vulnerability is what is left over after the state has measured other options. This is a relevant distinction in this case, as India’s two main dependencies on Russia are of a different nature. Defense systems made in Russia are a systemic vulnerability. Replacement takes many years and requires significant modification to equipment, spare parts, maintenance, training, ammunition and supporting infrastructure. Russian crude has a shallower exposure, which is more sensitive-friendly because there are other suppliers. But a switch of supplier could mean higher prices, a change in the economics of refining, and added costs for freight and supply security. Material constraint is therefore a measurable variable, and the level of its intensity is estimated through the cost of adjustment and not the volume of trade (Iwadi & Ali, 2025; Abudu & Salman, 2025; Rusok et al., 2025).

Hedging becomes the risk-management strategy, and multi-alignment is one of the practices to execute the strategy at the fourth and operational level (Godson & Salman, 2026; Sai et al., 2025). That's quite a difference. Hedging is a method of risk management in uncertainty through making commitments that are offsetting and deliberately contradictory so that no single relationship is irreversible. Multi-alignment = multiple partnerships at one time. A state may multi-align in order not only to reduce its risk, but also to increase its impact. This line is exactly drawn in the latest research on India. In the latest research on India, risk-mitigating hedging is distinguished from opportunity-seeking multi-alignment (Kara, 2025; Akmal et al., 2025; Basit et al., 2025). India's visible outputs are well known: abstention rather than condemnation, continued purchase of Russian crude and ever closer technological ties with Washington, participation in the SCO with China while working in the Quad against it.

At the fourth and operational level, hedging is the risk-management strategy that emerges, and multi-alignment is one practice used to carry out this strategy (Godson & Salman, 2026; Sai et al., 2025). This distinction is important. Hedging manages risk under uncertainty through offsetting and deliberately contradictory commitments, so no single relationship becomes irreversible. Multi-alignment is the act of making several partnerships at once. By the term “multi-alignment”, a state may practice multi-alignment to increase its influence to mitigate

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its risk. This distinction is made in recent works on India, between risk-mitigating hedging versus opportunity-seeking multi-alignment (Kara, 2025; Akmal et al., 2025; Basit et al., 2025). This distinction has recently been made. India's visible outputs include not condemning but abstaining, purchasing Russian crude while deepening technology ties with Washington, and participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with China while operating in the Quad against it. The three levels above explain these outputs.

When the concepts are arranged like this, they start to work together. The reason autonomy is worth protecting comes from structural realism, and balance-of-threat logic marks out China as the orienting threat. Asymmetric interconnection then tells which dependencies narrow India's choices, and by how much. The behavioural response to all this is hedging, and part of that hedging is carried out through multi-alignment. From here, the central construct can be stated. Materially constrained hedging is defined in this article as risk-management behavior that a state adopts to protect its strategic autonomy, in a situation where asymmetric material vulnerabilities have narrowed the feasible range of its policy choices. The same mechanism is shown in Figure 1 as a causal chain (Wu et al., 2026; Faiz et al., 2026; Mampilly et al., 2026).

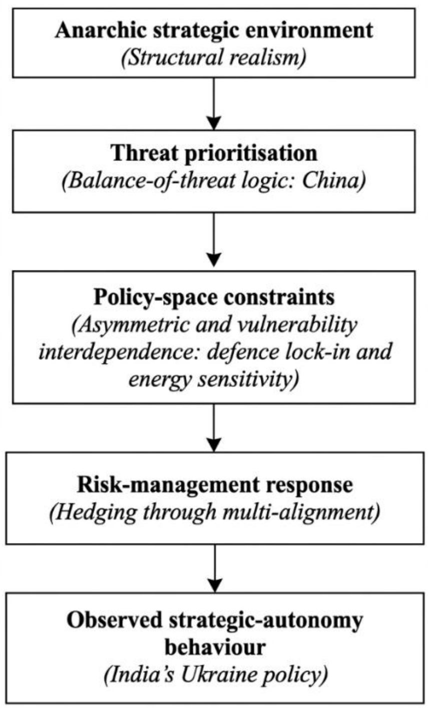

Figure 1. Analytical framework of materially constrained hedging

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This article adopts an embedded qualitative single-case research design. It uses theory-testing process tracing to examine whether India's decision not to participate in the Western sanctions regime against Russia can be causally linked to identifiable defence, energy, and geopolitical constraints. The design suits the research problem because the article addresses a contemporary foreign-policy episode in which normative claims, threat perception, material dependence, and diplomatic conduct interact across several policy domains, and because the aim is within-case causal explanation. The study does not seek statistical inference from a population of cases. It evaluates a specified causal argument against plausible alternatives using within-case evidence, which is the task for which theory-testing process tracing is designed.

3.2. Case, unit of analysis, and focal decision episode

The design distinguishes three levels that earlier treatments of the topic tend to conflate. The case is India's strategic-autonomy behaviour in response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict from February 2022. The unit of analysis is the set of major foreign-policy decisions through which India exercised strategic autonomy during that period. The focal decision episode, on which the causal analysis concentrates, is India's non-participation in the Western sanctions regime against Russia. India's continued and expanded purchase of Russian crude is treated not as part of the decision but as causal evidence bearing on its costs and consequences, which keeps the explanation separate from the behaviour it seeks to explain. Several supporting episodes serve as corroborating evidence rather than as independent causal tests. These include India's United Nations voting behaviour, the parallel diplomacy toward Moscow and Kyiv, defense-procurement decisions, and engagement through the Quad, BRICS, and the SCO (Goel et al., 2025; Jia & Duraipandi, 2025; Pant et al., 2025; Aspan et al., 2025)

3.3. Matching research questions to design components

The three research questions are connected in their logic, but in method they stay distinct and each question is answered by a different part of the design. If these questions are treated as a single, undifferentiated test, this objects that a single process trace cannot at the same time establish historical background, causal explanation, and future sustainability. Table 1 shows this correspondence.

This division also fixes the causal status of NATO enlargement. Enlargement and the longer deterioration of Russia–West relations form the antecedent structural background. The acute external shock confronting Indian policymakers is the 2022 invasion together with the Western sanctions regime that followed.

Table 1. Research questions and corresponding design components

Research question	Analytical task	Design component
RQ1. How did NATO's eastern enlargement and the 2022 war alter India's external environment?	Establish antecedent and precipitating conditions	Historical and contextual analysis (Section 4)
RQ2. Why did India decline to join the Western sanctions regime while maintaining ties with Russia and Ukraine?	Evaluate the causal explanation against rivals	Theory-testing process tracing (Section 5)
RQ3. Under what conditions does materially constrained hedging remain sustainable?	Derive scope conditions and project them forward	Analytical generalisation and scenario analysis (Section 8)

3.4. The causal mechanism and its observable implications

In theory-testing process tracing, the mechanism has to be stated in advance and broken into steps. Each step comes with the evidence that should appear if the mechanism really operated. The mechanism goes as follows. The shock in Russia-West geopolitics raised the pressure on India to align. Indian policymakers judged this pressure through India's Asian strategic environment. In that environment, the China-related considerations raised the strategic value of keeping functional relations with Russia. Defence vulnerability and energy-price exposure narrowed the available policy space. The anticipated cost of aligning with sanctions rose accordingly. India declined sanctions participation, and simultaneous engagement with Russia and Western actors produced a pattern of materially constrained hedging. Table 2 pairs each step with the evidence that would confirm its operation.

Table 2. Causal mechanism and observable evidence

Mechanism step	Observable evidence sought
Russia-West shock intensifies pressure to align	Western diplomatic and sanctions demands directed at India; documented expectation of alignment
China-related considerations raise the value of Russia ties	Official or elite reasoning connecting India's Russia policy to its China-facing strategic position
Defence vulnerability is exposed	Procurement, maintenance, spare-parts, interoperability, and long-cycle supply considerations in decisions and statements
Energy-price exposure is exposed	Price, import volume, inflation, and supply-security concerns in government statements
Anticipated cost of alignment rises	Contemporaneous statements, policy documents, material indicators, or decision sequences showing that defence, energy, or geopolitical adjustment costs entered the sanctions calculation
Sanctions non-participation is enacted	Formal non-participation in non-UN sanctions; public defence of the position
Hedging is observable	Simultaneous cooperation with opposing power centres across the same period

3.5. Rival explanations

To avoid confirming the argument by construction, the analysis weighs the material-constraint explanation against two real alternatives, each of which generates distinct observable implications.

- H1. The material-constraint explanation, holds that India declined sanctions participation primarily because material and geopolitical constraints imposed substantial costs on alignment. It comprises three component mechanisms: H1a, defence vulnerability, in which disrupting Russian military supply relationships imposes high and slow-to-reverse adjustment costs; H1b, energy-security and price exposure, in which forgoing Russian crude raises price or supply-security costs; and H1c, geopolitical constraint, in which India seeks to preserve Russia's strategic utility relative to China.
- H2. The ideational and legacy explanation, holds that India's policy derives principally from historically embedded diplomatic identity and strategic-autonomy norms rather than from contemporary material constraint. Historical affinity with Russia, the non-alignment tradition, and a sovereignty-oriented resistance to Western pressure serve as indicators of this broader explanation.
- H3. The opportunistic-economic explanation, holds that India's behaviour was driven predominantly by the commercial gain from discounted Russian energy, independent of strategic constraint.

The three explanations do not predict the same thing. If H1 holds, then decision-making should show identifiable adjustment costs, and these costs come before or together with the sanctions decision. The China-facing considerations should also be present in the reasoning. If H2 holds, then the accommodation of Russia should continue, even in the case where material adjustment costs go down. If H3 holds, then the scale of India's Russian engagement should follow the relative commercial advantage of Russian supplies, and it should follow this advantage more closely than it follows the strategic or diplomatic conditions.

3.6. Propositions

From the framework in Section 2 and the mechanism above, the article derives five propositions for within-case evaluation, stated as observable implications that evidence can support or weaken rather than as conclusively falsifiable laws.

- P1. Threat orientation: If materially constrained hedging explains India's policy, decision-making should show that the Asian balance against China, and not the European conflict alone, informed the value placed on preserving relations with Russia.
- P2. Material vulnerability: If material constraint is causal,

policymakers should identify concrete adjustment costs attached to disrupting Russian defence or energy links, and these costs should precede or accompany the sanctions decision.

- P3. Hedging: If India is hedging rather than aligning with Russia, continued cooperation with Moscow should coexist with substantial strategic, technological, and security cooperation with Western powers.
- P4. Ideational persistence: If historical affinity or strategic-autonomy identity is the principal explanation, accommodation of Russia should persist even when material adjustment costs substantially decline.
- P5. Commercial responsiveness: If opportunistic economic gain is the principal explanation, Russian energy engagement should vary with the relative commercial advantage of Russian crude more than with defence or geopolitical considerations.

3.7. Data sources and selection

The analysis uses four categories of evidence, combined to enable triangulation. The first category is official documents. These come from the Ministry of External Affairs, NATO, the United Nations, and other state institutions, and they provide declared positions and diplomatic language. The second category uses secondary quantitative indicators, mainly arms-transfer and energy-import data, which show the material basis of India's choices. The third category is scholarly literature. This literature covers the seven areas that feed the framework: realism, balance of threat, interdependence, hedging, multi-alignment, non-alignment and strategic autonomy. The fourth category is independent policy and think-tank analyses. These provide interpretations that come from outside official state narratives, and they also help identify areas of agreement, dispute, or contradiction.

The document-analysis process was kept clear by setting a few parameters beforehand. Most of the documents belong to the period between February 2022 and mid-2026, though a few older ones are also included when the earlier situation made them relevant. For the main documents, the official sources were the Ministry of External Affairs, NATO, the United Nations Digital Library, and the government websites of the countries involved. SIPRI and energy-market data provided the material side of the evidence, while academic and institutional publications provided the interpretive side. The documents themselves were of several types, such as official statements, joint declarations, policy speeches, voting records, treaty texts and quantitative datasets. For the retrieval by theme, the search terms were taken from the 6 coding categories, and named actors and events were added as well, such as sanctions, Russian crude, arms transfers, United Nations resolutions and the relevant summits. The analysis was tested in English, using the official English texts along with the English translations. A source was kept when it satisfied three criteria and was left out when it satisfied none of them. The first criterion was direct relevance to at least one core theme. The second was that the source carried evidence for at least one analytical category. The third was a clear evidence type, so that primary evidence could be divided from interpretive evidence. The evidentiary core is made up of several dozen primary documents, and these are supported by the material datasets and by the scholarly and policy literature.

3.8. Analytical procedure

The chosen material is coded by theme and placed under six categories from the framework: defense dependence, energy security, China-related threat perception, sovereignty and international law, sanctions exposure, and Global South positioning. For the most part, this coding is deductive. Some evidence did not agree with the proposed mechanism, and some evidence supported a rival explanation instead. This evidence was still kept and coded as negative evidence, and it was not pushed into the 6 framework types. In this way, the procedure does not sort all the material toward H1. After this, the coded evidence is read against the mechanism in Table 2, and against the rival explanations in Section 3.5. On that basis, the analysis assesses the relative evidentiary support for the material-constraint, ideational-legacy, and opportunistic-economic explanations, and separately evaluates whether the resulting behavioural pattern is more accurately characterized as alignment, neutrality, or hedging. Keeping causal explanation distinct from behavioural classification in this way guards against treating a description of conduct as though it were its cause. Triangulation across official statements, material indicators, United Nations voting behaviour, scholarly literature, and independent assessment guards against reliance on any single source type. Table 3 summarises the design.

Table 3. Summary of the research design

Design element	Specification
Research design	Embedded qualitative single-case study
Case	India's strategic-autonomy behaviour in response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict
Focal decision episode	Non-participation in the Western sanctions regime against Russia
Primary method	Theory-testing process tracing
Supporting method	Qualitative document analysis
Core explanation	Materially constrained hedging (H1: defence vulnerability, energy-price exposure, China-related constraint)
Rival explanations	H2 ideational and legacy; H3 opportunistic economic
Primary analytical period	February 2022 to 2026; historical antecedents examined selectively from the Cold War and post-Cold War periods
Coding categories	Defence dependence, energy security, China threat perception, sovereignty, sanctions exposure, Global South positioning, plus retained negative evidence.
Generalisation	Analytical, not statistical

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4. NATO's Eastern enlargement as an antecedent condition

4.1. Enlargement and the security dilemma

To understand the 2022 shock, NATO's eastern enlargement has to be taken as the structural background. For India, the important point is not the order in which the accessions happened, but the security dilemma that this order created. After the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union broke apart, NATO widened its role in the post-Cold War period, and it still kept collective defence as its core function. In the enlargements of 1999 and 2004, it admitted one group after another of Central and Eastern European states, including former Warsaw Pact members and former Soviet republics (NATO, 2024). The acceding states and NATO saw enlargement as a way to firm up their sovereignty and to give them security against any renewed coercion. Russian leaders increasingly read the same process differently. For them, it cut down Russia's strategic influence and brought a rival military alliance nearer to its borders. The security dilemma comes from this clash between the two threat perceptions. It does not come from any idea that the two positions were equal in normative or legal terms. These two readings became increasingly difficult to reconcile, producing a security dilemma that persisted for a long time. It survived several attempts at NATO–Russia cooperation.

4.2. The Bucharest ambiguity

The 2008 Bucharest Summit turned the dilemma into a sharper and more specific fault line. At the summit, NATO said that Georgia and Ukraine would become members, but it did not give either country a Membership Action Plan. At the same time, it named MAP as the next step on their way toward membership (NATO, 2008). So, the outcome joined a long-term membership commitment together with no immediate accession mechanism, and this ambiguity worked in both directions. For Kyiv and Tbilisi, it confirmed a Euro-Atlantic destination, but it gave them no timetable. For Moscow it signalled that the alliance might eventually reach the core of the post-Soviet space. The intervening years hardened the confrontation through the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, after which NATO suspended practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia while retaining limited channels for political dialogue. By the eve of the 2022 invasion, opposition to further NATO enlargement, and Ukrainian membership in particular, had become one of the central demands in Russia's proposed restructuring of the European security order.

4.3. From antecedent condition to acute shock

The distinction between background and trigger is what makes this section an account of antecedent conditions rather than of the shock itself. Enlargement and the long deterioration of Russia-West relations set the stage. The acute external shock confronting Indian policymakers was Russia's full-scale invasion of February 2022 and the Western sanctions regime that followed. The invasion and the sanctions and diplomatic responses that followed converted what had previously centered on the European security order into a wider geopolitical alignment problem. Finland's and Sweden's subsequent accessions, which ended decades of Nordic military non-alignment and more than doubled NATO's land border with Russia, demonstrated how profoundly the war had altered that order. Finland's accession, following a threat perception and a movement in public opinion that shifted rapidly only after the invasion, marked an especially sharp reversal of a long tradition (Forsberg, 2024). It is at this point that the European story becomes an Indian one.

4.4. Channels of transmission to India

India took no part in NATO enlargement and had no alliance obligation inside the European security order. Even so, the confrontation still reached Indian foreign policy, and it did this through several indirect but important channels. Each of these channels matters for the analysis that comes next. First, the stronger Russia-West polarisation raised the diplomatic pressure on India's multi-vector strategy. Some Western officials pushed New Delhi to condemn Russia more openly, to avoid sanctions circumvention, and to hold back the growth of Russian energy purchases. This pressure was not uniform across governments, and it never turned into a single formal demand for India to join the sanctions regime.

Second, the war and the sanctions made established defense-supply relationships more complicated, and at the same time they sharply changed global energy prices and trade flows. India's weakness on the defense side comes from old Russian-origin platforms and the supply arrangements built around them. On the energy side, the problem takes another shape. Most of India's crude is imported, so world prices hit it directly, and the cheaper Russian oil that came later became one way to bring the bill down.

Third, several things happened at the same time. The war, the sanctions from the West, and the shrinking of Russia's economic and technological ties to the West all made Russia depend more heavily on China. And, China is the very country that sits at the centre of India's threat assessment, because of its military strength, its nearness on the map, and the border dispute that stays unresolved.

5. Tracing the focal decision: India's non-participation in the Western sanctions regime

5.1. The focal decision and India's pattern of conduct

The focal episode is India's decision, sustained from February 2022 onward, not to join the Western sanctions regime against Russia while continuing to engage Moscow and Kyiv. The task of this section is to explain that decision. It traces whether the mechanism specified in Section 3 operated and weighs the material-constraint explanation (H1) against the ideational-legacy (H2) and opportunistic-economic (H3) alternatives. The evidence is organized around the three component mechanisms of H1: defence vulnerability (H1a), energy-price exposure (H1b), and China-related geopolitical constraint (H1c). Throughout, the analysis distinguishes evidence bearing on the initiation of the decision in 2022 from evidence bearing on its persistence through 2026, since a later event cannot explain an earlier choice.

India's conduct across the conflict formed a consistent pattern rather than a single gesture. At the United Nations, India abstained on the principal resolutions condemning the invasion and demanding withdrawal, including the resolution of 23 February 2023, which passed 141 to 7 with 32 abstentions including India, China, and Pakistan (*UN News*, 2023). That voting behaviour displayed continuity even as the content of the resolutions and the alignment of Western states changed. It extended through the competing resolutions of February 2025 and the fourth-anniversary resolution of February 2026, on which India again abstained on a text that even the United States did not support (*Times of India*, 2025; *News on Air*, 2026). Alongside abstention, India declined to adopt the Western sanctions on Russia, defended its continued purchase of Russian crude, evacuated its nationals through Operation Ganga, and sent humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. The continuity of this pattern across four years and shifting alignments is itself an analytical clue, since a stance held steady while commercial and diplomatic conditions changed is difficult to attribute to momentary advantage alone.

5.2. Defence vulnerability (H1a)

The defence constraint is the clearest instance of vulnerability interdependence in the sense defined in Section 2, a dependence whose adjustment cost is high and slow to reverse. For many decades, Russia has been the main arms supplier to India. This dominance is now declining, but through the conflict it remained large. SIPRI shows that Russia's share of Indian arms imports fell from 72% in 2010-14 to 55% in 2015-19, and then to around 36 to 40% in the most recent five-year windows. Over the same time, India remains the world's second-largest arms importer (SIPRI, 2025; 2026). What matters here is less the volume and more the embeddedness. Contemporary estimates put the Soviet or Russian-origin share of India's in-service military equipment near 85 to 90%. Major systems like the S-400 air-defense network cannot be replaced at short notice. This system was limited to USD 5.43 billion, and the war directly disrupted its delivery schedule (Deccan Herald, 2022; Stimson Center, 2022).

This vulnerability was recognized contemporaneously by India's own leadership at the time of the decision. In October 2022, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar publicly described India's substantial inventory of Soviet and Russian-origin weapons and explained that the inventory had grown over multiple decades (*ThePrint*, 2022b).

5.3. Energy-price exposure (H1b)

The energy constraint is of a different kind, and distinguishing it from the defence case is essential. India was not dependent on Russian crude before the war. Russia supplied roughly 0.2% of India's crude in January 2022 and about 2% across the 2021-22 financial year, far behind Iraq and Saudi Arabia (*Business Standard*, 2025). What the war produced was not a pre-existing lock-in but a new opportunity. Discounted Russian crude became available when Western buyers withdrew, and India's share from Russia rose to around 35 to 40% by 2023-24 (ibid). In the terms of Section 2, this is energy-price sensitivity rather than deep vulnerability, since alternative suppliers exist and the constraint is expressed through relative price, freight, supply availability, refining margins, payment arrangements, and energy-security diversification.

The official reasoning at that time fits this same logic. In August 2022, Jaishankar gave reasons for the purchases based on consumer affordability. He pointed to India's low per-capita income, and he called the job of getting the best available deal a duty toward Indian citizens. He also noted that Europe had redirected Middle Eastern supply, and this had tightened Asia's traditional sources (*ThePrint*, 2022c). In December 2022, before Parliament, he set the policy clearly around market conditions. He said India buys from many sources and goes where the best deal is available, and he added that if the market gave more competitive options, India would respond accordingly (*ThePrint*, 2022a). For H1b this counts as near-ideal process-tracing evidence. It comes right at the focal decision, and it states the price-security logic in the government's own words.

5.4. China-related geopolitical constraint (H1c)

The third component carries the heaviest evidentiary burden, and for this reason it is treated most cautiously. The mechanism claims that India valued the functional relations with Russia in part to stop Moscow from falling into a deeper dependence on Beijing, and that Beijing is India's main security challenge. This kind of reasoning shows up in authoritative Indian strategic analysis. C. Raja Mohan writes that reassuring Russia has been a major aim of Indian diplomacy, even while India was building its partnership with the United States. Moscow's partnership with Beijing keeps growing, and at the same time India's own relations with China get worse. This is the background against which Delhi manages its ties with Moscow. He observes that India and Russia sit on opposite sides of the main US-China fault line. Yet both of them still value a relationship that gives them more room for maneuver (Raja Mohan, 2024).

This evidence has a key limitation to be mentioned. Raja Mohan is a leading analyst of Indian strategy, but his writing cannot show what happened inside the government during its own deliberation on the sanctions. His work makes clear that the China concern is a coherent strategic idea and that it has a real place in serious Indian strategic discourse. At the same time, it is not clear that this concern has any influence on the February 2022 decision. For this reason, H1c gets only suggestive to moderate support, which is weaker than the support for H1a and H1b, and P1 holds at the same qualified level rather than being fully established.

5.5. The hedging pattern (P3)

If India were aligning with Russia and not hedging, then its cooperation with Moscow would not stay together with substantial cooperation with the West. But the evidence shows that it did stay together. In this period, India built up its technology and security cooperation with the United States. It also increased its defense purchases from France and Israel, until these two became its main alternative suppliers. It also kept an active engagement with Europe, the Quad, and the Global South. The SIPRI diversification data give strong supporting evidence. Russia's share went down, and at the same time France rose to around 29% and Israel to around 15%. This shows that India spreads its dependence and does not deepen a single alignment (SIPRI, 2026). Arms diversification by itself does not prove hedging. But when it is put together with Quad participation, India-US technology cooperation, European partnerships, and continued Russian engagement, it forms the evident signature of hedging set out in Table 2, and it supports P3.

5.6. Weighing the rival explanations

The material-constraint explanation is best checked against the alternatives. The ideational-legacy explanation (H2) says that India's conduct came from a historical affinity with Russia and from a non-alignment tradition, and not from present-day constraint. This explanation has something real in it, and it is not banned here. India moved away from Russian arms and at the same time kept its diplomatic accommodation of Russia, and this in fact fits with H2, because the accommodation can continue even when material dependence goes down. So, the defence diversification by itself does not make H2 weaker. The more defensible conclusion is a comparative one. H2 can plausibly explain part of the persistence and the diplomatic language around the relationship. But, on its own, it cannot account for the specific defence adjustment costs and the energy-price calculations that were predictable in the 2022 decision environment, and these are explained directly by H1.

To test the opportunistic-economic explanation (H3), the paper uses P5. Under P5, the expectation is that commercial advantage moves India's engagement with Russia more than the strategic conditions do. In 2026, the energy domain gives an unusually clean within-case test. In February 2026, India's Russian crude fell to just over 1.1 million barrels per day because sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, along with US trade pressure, started to bite. Then a Strait of Hormuz disruption took most of the Gulf supply offline. After this, Russian volumes almost doubled by March, and by June 2026 they reached a record of about 2.6 million barrels per day, more than half of India's imports (*Outlook News Desk*, 2026; *Hellenic Shipping News*, 2026). For the crude volumes, these swings up and down are a strong point in favor of H3. In two ways, the same evidence also puts a limit on how far H3 can reach. First, analysts put the swing down to supply availability and security, and not to discount-chasing. In their reading, the Russian crude worked as an insurance against a Gulf disruption, because India's strategic reserves are thin. So even the volume behaviour is not purely commercial (Katona, 2026). Second, the sanctions non-participation and the UN abstention pattern stayed steady across four years, and they were apart from these swings. The defence and the China-related constraints also work whatever the oil discount is. For the volume of Russian crude purchases, then, H3 does very well, but for India's wider Russia policy it does poorly.

5.7. Assessment

Read across the three component mechanisms and the five propositions, the evidence supports the material-constraint explanation as the best overall account of India's non-participation in the Western sanctions regime. But, the unevenness proposes the trace is more the record than the thesis. Table 4 summarizes the various components that make up the strength of support. H1a is a defense vulnerability that is already present and well supported. Significant support is already in place and was recognized in 2022. The government's own contemporaneous reasoning supports the energy-price exposure hypothesis (H1b) substantially, although this hypothesis overlaps with a commercially responsive pattern that is also adequately explained by H3. Support for the China-related constraint (also called H1c) ranges from moderate to suggestive. Strategically coherent and present in authoritative analyses, but relatively weaker on the direct evidence for policymakers. Competitors do not discard H2; it is incomplete, and H3 is strong for oil volumes but weak overall. These two hypotheses are mutually exclusive. Hedging is the pattern of behavior, not alignment (P3).

The composite these findings describe is materially constrained hedging: risk-management behaviour undertaken to preserve strategic autonomy, operating within asymmetric material limits that India could neither ignore nor quickly escape.

Table 4. Evidentiary support across mechanisms and rival explanations

Element	Constraint type	Principal evidence	Proposition	Level of support
H1a Defence	Vulnerability (lock-in)	85-90% Soviet/ Russian-origin inventory; S-400; Jaishankar, Oct 2022	P2	Strong
H1b Energy	Price sensitivity	0.2%→40% post-war shift; Jaishankar, Aug and Dec 2022	P2	Strong (overlaps H3)
H1c China	Geopolitical	Raja Mohan 2024; sustained Moscow engagement	P1	Moderate/suggestive
Hedging	—	Diversification to France, Israel, US; Quad; EU	P3	Strong
H2 Legacy	Rival	Persistence of accommodation and diplomatic language	P4	Not rejected; incomplete alone
H3 Commercial	Rival	Feb–June 2026 volume swing with supply conditions	P5	Strong for oil volumes; weak for wider policy

Section 6 examines how India managed this position across its wider network of partnerships.

6. Multi-vector diplomacy as constraint-management

6.1. The architecture as constraint-management

Section 5 found strong evidence that defence vulnerability and energy-price exposure constrained India's policy, while China-related geopolitical considerations received more qualified support. This section examines the diplomatic architecture through which India managed those constraints. The multi-vector pattern of Indian diplomacy is frequently defined as a portfolio of partnerships pursued for their own sake. Set against the findings of Section 5, it is better understood as constraint-management: a pattern of distributing relationships and capabilities across several partners, reducing the risk that any single dependence becomes controlling. Different vectors contribute, frequently simultaneously, to managing defence, technological, geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic constraints, and the architecture as a whole is the operational form that hedging takes.

Constraint-management is presented here as the article's analytical interpretation of a demonstrated pattern of diversification, not as a claim that New Delhi assigned each relationship to a particular vulnerability by design. Isolation and equidistance were never the aim. The aim was to keep the feasible policy space as wide as the material limits allowed.

6.2. Russia as anchor and constraint

The Russia vector is the clearest case in which a partnership functions simultaneously as an asset and as the source of the constraint it must manage. Russian- and Soviet-origin systems remain deeply embedded in India's defence inventory, and Russia has been a major crude supplier since 2022, frequently on commercially advantageous terms. The India-Russia summit tradition, sustained through the annual summits of July 2024 and December 2025, and the language of a special and privileged strategic partnership signal continued political investment (MEA, 2024a). The same relationship generates the vulnerabilities traced in Section 5: the defence lock-in that raises the cost of any rupture, the sanctions and compliance exposure that Russian energy and defence links carry, and the possibility that Russia's growing dependence on China may reduce its value to India as an autonomous Eurasian partner. India's conduct toward Russia therefore manages a dependence it is simultaneously trying to reduce, which is why sustained engagement coexists with measurable diversification away from Russian arms.

6.3. The United States, Europe, and Israel as diversification vectors

The non-Russian supplier partnerships are the channels through which India widens its alternatives to Russian defence and technological dependence. Cooperation with the United States concentrates on advanced technology and Indo-Pacific security. The TRUST initiative announced in February 2025, spanning defence, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technology, biotechnology, energy, and space, illustrates India's pursuit of technological capability as a source of strategic autonomy (PSA, 2025). What makes this a hedging vector rather than an alignment is that India sustains it without adopting the American position on Ukraine and without accepting formal alliance obligations, demonstrating the principle that convergence in one domain need not require alignment in others. The European vector operates in trade, technology governance, and defence procurement, with France now India's largest non-Russian arms supplier at around 29% of imports. Israel, distinct from the European vector, supplies a further roughly 15%, concentrated in defence technology (SIPRI, 2026). Partnerships with the United States, European states, Israel, and other suppliers together expand India's alternatives as Russia's share declines, forming the supply side of the constraint-management pattern: the more credible India's non-Russian options become, the less controlling its Russian dependence.

6.4. The Quad, BRICS, and the SCO as issue-segmented engagement

The multilateral vectors allow India to separate issues that would otherwise force a single alignment. The Quad provides a mechanism for Indo-Pacific coordination that contributes to balancing the pressures associated with China's rise while stopping short of treaty-based alliance commitments (*Indian Express*, 2020). BRICS proposes a platform for reforming global governance and strengthening non-Western representation. India treats it as non-Western without construing participation as an anti-Western alignment, a distinction its own leadership has drawn explicitly (MEA, 2023b). The SCO is the most revealing case, because it seats India alongside China and Pakistan, its two principal security concerns, which makes participation strategically uncomfortable. Official statements describe the SCO as contributing to regional peace, security, and economic development, and India's participation enables it to maintain an institutional presence in continental Eurasian security affairs alongside China, Russia, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states (MEA, 2024b). This can be interpreted as reducing the strategic cost of exclusion from a region in which China and Russia exercise substantial influence, though that interpretation goes beyond any stated official motive.

6.5. Global South positioning and its limits

The Global South vector supplies the normative and diplomatic framing that holds the architecture together. India's projection of development-oriented leadership, expressed through platforms such as the Voice of Global South Summit and its emphasis on food security, energy security, debt, and reform of global governance, provides a development-centered and pluralist framing. Within it, India presents strategic autonomy as compatible with the concerns of developing states rather than as support for either geopolitical bloc (MEA, 2023a). This framing carries a genuine tension that Section 5 already exposed. India's emphasis on sovereignty and development sits awkwardly with the criticism that its reluctance to condemn Russia is difficult to reconcile with its stated respect for Ukraine's sovereignty. The Global South vector is thus both a source of credibility and a site of the normative strain that materially constrained hedging can produce, since a policy shaped by material limits cannot always align perfectly with the principles it invokes. Table 5 summarises how each vector relates to the constraint or exposure it addresses.

Taken together, these relationships constitute the operational pattern of materially constrained hedging. India sustains overlapping partnerships that widen its available policy options, diversify important dependencies, and reduce the risk that any single external relationship becomes controlling. Section 7 draws the theoretical and empirical strands together, returning to the framework of Section 2 and the two rival readings the article set out to adjudicate.

Table 5. India's multi-vector diplomacy as constraint-management

Vector	Principal constraint or exposure	Function in the strategy
Russia	Legacy defence vulnerability; energy relationship	Maintain necessary cooperation while gradually reducing excessive dependence
United States	Technology and capability gaps; Indo-Pacific security pressures	Capability-building, technology access, and strategic diversification
Europe/ France	Defense-supplier concentration; trade and technology diversification	Alternative procurement and broader economic and technological engagement
Israel	Defense-supplier concentration	Defense-technology and procurement diversification
Quad	China-related security pressure	Indo-Pacific coordination without formal alliance obligation
BRICS	Pressure toward bloc polarisation; governance representation	Preserve non-Western institutional options without requiring anti-Western alignment
SCO	Need for continental Eurasian access	Maintain participation in Eurasian security and political networks
Global South	Diplomatic and normative legitimacy	Frame autonomy through development, sovereignty, and reform of global governance

7. Discussion

7.1. The framework and the findings

The purpose of this section is to draw together the theoretical framework developed in Section 2 and the empirical findings of Sections 5 and 6, and to establish what the case contributes beyond its own particulars. The proposed model is that India's conduct could be understood through four ordered levels: structural realism establishing why autonomy is worth protecting, balance-of-threat logic identifying China as the orienting threat, asymmetric interdependence specifying which dependencies narrow India's choices, and hedging describing the behavioural response. The empirical analysis broadly supports this ordering. It does so with an unevenness that is itself informative and that the discussion preserves rather than smooths over.

At the structural level, the case is consistent with realist expectations concerning security, freedom of action, and sensitivity to strategically consequential dependence. India resisted binding alignment and preserved freedom of action under pressure, consistent with a state operating in a self-help system that treats strategically consequential dependence as a potential liability to be managed. The framework was careful not to claim that realism predicts non-alignment as such, and the case respects that limit. India's conduct is compatible with realism without being deducible from it, since the same structural incentives could in principle have produced closer Western alignment had India's material circumstances differed.

At the level of threat, the balance-of-threat expectation received qualified support. The China-related mechanism (H1c) was the weakest of the three material components, resting on authoritative strategic analysis rather than on direct evidence of governmental deliberation over sanctions. The discussion therefore states the finding precisely. China is a plausible reference threat within Indian strategic discourse and is consistent with the wider pattern of Indian conduct, but the case does not establish that a China calculation drove the specific 2022 sanctions decision. This is a genuine limit on the framework's second level, not a gap to be papered over.

At the level of interdependence, the framework performed strongest, and it did so precisely because it distinguished vulnerability from sensitivity. The defence relationship (H1a) behaved as a vulnerability, with high and slow-to-reverse adjustment costs recognized contemporaneously by India's own leadership, while the energy relationship (H1b) behaved as a price-sensitivity, real but shallower and commercially responsive. Suppose the framework had treated these two dependencies as equivalent, as the earlier vocabulary of undifferentiated interdependence would have. It could not then have explained why India could adjust its Russian oil volumes sharply across 2026 while its underlying defence vulnerability and its non-participation in Western sanctions persisted. The sensitivity–vulnerability distinction is where the framework earned its explanatory value.

7.2. The propositions assessed

The five propositions can now be evaluated against the evidence, and the pattern of support matters as much as its direction. Evidence bearing on P2, concerning material adjustment costs, gave strong support, documented in the 2022 statements on defence inventory and energy affordability that sit at the focal decision. Evidence bearing on P3, concerning hedging, gave strong support in the coexistence of sustained Russian engagement with expanding United States, French, and Israeli partnerships and active multilateral diplomacy. Evidence bearing on P1, concerning threat orientation, gave moderate support, plausible and coherent but not directly evidenced in the decision itself. The tests of the rival explanations produced the most instructive result. Evidence bearing on P4 indicates that the ideational-legacy explanation cannot be rejected but is incomplete on its own.

In contrast, evidence bearing on P5 shows substantial commercial responsiveness in Russian crude volumes without extending that explanatory power to the wider sanctions decision. No single explanation accounts for the entire pattern. The material-constraint explanation receives the strongest overall evidentiary support because it accounts for a larger portion of the observed decision process while remaining compatible with the partial contributions of H2 and H3.

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7.3. The two rival readings revisited

The article began with two competing readings of India's Ukraine policy: the pragmatic-neutrality reading, which treats India's conduct as sensible balancing in a fragmented order, and the normative-inconsistency reading, which treats it as a state invoking a rules-based order while declining to uphold it. The analysis allows both to be located rather than merely rejected. The pragmatic-neutrality reading is correct that India's conduct is interest-driven, but it understates the unequal costs attached to India's options. India was exercising genuine agency, but among options carrying unequal strategic and economic costs, some of which, particularly in defence, could not be altered quickly.

The normative-inconsistency reading requires a more careful treatment, because it operates on a different plane from the causal analysis presented here. It correctly identifies a tension between India's stated commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity and its unwillingness to adopt the punitive measures favored by Western governments. The present analysis does not resolve that normative decision. It adds a causal explanation for why the gap emerged and persisted, and material constraint can explain inconsistency without justifying it. A critic may consistently accept that constraints shaped India's conduct while maintaining that the conduct remained normatively inconsistent with India's stated principles, and nothing in the process trace settles that evaluative question.

The two readings are therefore better treated as partial interpretations that the constrained-hedging framework places within a common causal account. Materially constrained hedging explains why the same conduct appears as principled autonomy from New Delhi's vantage point and as inconsistency from the West's, since both describe a state exercising real diplomatic latitude within hard material limits. It does not thereby adjudicate which vantage point is normatively correct. The pragmatic reading is partially supported but underestimates the constraints. The normative reading identifies a genuine tension whose material origins the study explains but whose evaluative force it leaves intact.

7.4. Contribution and generalization

The case contributes in three ways, each bounded by the limits established in the methodology. Conceptually, the article refines the idea of materially constrained hedging by specifying the mechanism through which differing adjustment costs narrow the policy space available to a hedging state, and by distinguishing the severity of constraint by the cost of adjustment rather than the volume of exchange. Theoretically, the case illustrates the analytical payoff of ordering realism, balance-of-threat logic, and asymmetric interdependence, since it was the ordering, and particularly the sensitivity-vulnerability distinction, that carried the explanatory weight. Empirically, the article provides an explicit within-case trace linking contemporaneously recognised defence and energy constraints to India's post-2022 policy environment.

These contributions rest on analytical, not statistical, generalization. The case refines a concept and identifies the conditions under which it may apply, but it does not establish that materially constrained hedging characterizes the Global South as a class. The framework raises one askable question: whether the construct travels to Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, South Africa, or other states that adopted comparable postures. Only comparative work can answer it, since each of those states carries a different configuration of dependencies. The India case provides evidence that the construct can be operationalized through observable differences in adjustment costs and that, within this case, it receives stronger overall evidentiary support than either the ideational-legacy or commercial-opportunity explanation taken alone. Section 8 draws out the scope conditions under which the strategy remains sustainable and develops them into forward scenarios.

8. Scope conditions and future scenarios

8.1. From causal findings to scope conditions

This section addresses the third research question, which asks under what conditions materially constrained hedging remains sustainable. As the methodology established, this question is prospective and cannot be analyzed using the historical process trace used for the focal decision. The analysis therefore derives scope conditions from the constraints identified in Section 5 and uses them to construct scenarios. The scenarios are not forecasts. They are structured explorations of how the strategy behaves as its underlying variables move, presented to make the sustainability question analytically tractable.

The findings of Sections 5 and 6 identify two kinds of condition. Five are core strategic and material scope conditions, each grounded in a constraint the case documented: the depth and reversibility of India's defence vulnerability to Russia; India's oil-import exposure and the substitutability of Russian supply; the intensity of external sanctions, trade pressure, and compliance costs associated with India's Russia ties; the degree of Russia-China strategic and economic asymmetry; and the pace of India's diversification and capability-building across defence, energy, and technology. A sixth condition, the credibility of India's Global South and normative positioning, is of a different type. It is a diplomatic-legitimacy condition rather than a material constraint, and it is best treated as a secondary sustainability factor bearing on the reputational cost of the strategy rather than on its material feasibility.

8.2. The governing conditions in their current state

The present values of these conditions can be stated from the evidence.

India's defence vulnerability remains substantial but is declining, with Russia's share of arms imports falling toward 40% as French, Israeli, and United States sources expand (SIPRI, 2026). India's oil-import exposure remains high, while its dependence on any particular Russian volume is comparatively flexible. Russian sourcing swung between roughly 1.16 million barrels per day in February 2026 and a record near 2.6 million in June, as sanctions, a period of United States tariff pressure, and Gulf supply disruption moved (CNBC, 2026; *Outlook News Desk,* 2026). External pressure operated through two channels in 2025 and 2026. Entity-level sanctions on major Russian oil companies raised compliance costs for Indian refiners, while an additional United States tariff of 25% imposed a direct economy-wide cost outside the oil transaction itself. It was imposed in August 2025 explicitly over Russian oil purchases and removed in February 2026 following an India-United States understanding (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025; White House, 2025; 2026). Russia-China asymmetry has grown materially since 2022, with more than 95% of bilateral settlements now conducted in roubles and yuan. The relationship is not one of uninterrupted consolidation, however. Bilateral trade retreated from its 2024 record in 2025, and the May 2026 Xi–Putin summit deepened coordination while failing to conclude the major Power of Siberia 2 gas agreement (Government of Russia Federation, 2025; *Reuters*, 2026a; 2026b). India's diversification is proceeding but slowly, bounded by the long timelines of defence substitution. These values set the starting point from which the scenarios move.

8.3. Four scenarios

The scenarios are constructed on a common basis, varying three of the core conditions together: the intensity of external pressure, the pace of India's diversification, and the degree of Russia-China asymmetry. Each combination yields a different result for the sustainability of India's autonomy. The scenarios are analytical constructs and may overlap in practice.

In the first scenario, managed continuity, external pressure is moderate, diversification proceeds gradually, and Russia-China asymmetry remains limited or moderate. Under these conditions, continued sanctions non-participation, commercially responsive Russian energy purchases, gradual defence diversification, and multi-vector diplomacy would remain compatible with the observed strategy. Hedging remains viable, and the principal cost is diplomatic, in the form of continued Western criticism.

In the second scenario, sanctions squeeze, external pressure is high while diversification remains slow and Russia-China asymmetry is moderate. Here the strategy remains viable but becomes markedly more expensive. The 2025 and 2026 experience demonstrates both channels of this pressure operating in partial form. Entity-level sanctions raised compliance costs for Indian refiners, while the United States tariff temporarily imposed a direct economy-wide cost on India's continued Russian oil relationship before being removed. The sustainability of the strategy in this scenario depends on India's ability to substitute suppliers and manage financial and trade exposure faster than the pressure tightens.

In the third scenario, strategic compression, Russia-China asymmetry is high while diversification remains slow. This scenario explores the geopolitical mechanism that received qualified support in Section 5, and it is framed accordingly. If Russia's dependence on China were to deepen enough to reduce Moscow's independent room for maneuver, one hypothesized strategic benefit of India's Russia relationship, its value as an autonomous Eurasian partner, would weaken. In that event, maintaining ties with Russia would yield declining strategic returns while continuing to generate sanctions and reputational costs. Such conditions would strengthen India's incentive to accelerate diversification, because the strategic return from costly Russia-related exposure would fall, though more than one policy response would remain available.

In the fourth scenario, resilient autonomy through successful diversification, India's diversification and capability-building advance faster than external pressure and Russia-China asymmetry intensify. If defense diversification, indigenous production, alternative energy access, and technological capability-building outpace the deterioration of the other conditions, the adjustment costs attached to any single external relationship decline. Under these conditions, strategic autonomy becomes less dependent on diplomatic maneuvering, because the underlying material constraint itself has weakened. This is the most sustainable pathway, and it follows directly from the article's thesis: because the constraint is material, the strategy is most secure when the constraint shrinks.

8.4. Policy implications

The scenarios yield specific rather than general implications, addressing the criticism that recommendations to diversify defence and energy are frequently stated without operational content. In defence, the priority is to reduce single-supplier vulnerability while preserving interoperability and lifecycle sustainability, expanding co-production, maintenance, and spare-parts capacity so that the adjustment cost of any one supplier's disruption falls without multiplying integration and logistics burdens. In energy, the priority is to institutionalize supply diversification and a standing sanctions-risk monitoring capacity for refiners, banks, insurers, and shipping firms, converting the current ad hoc responsiveness into managed resilience. In technology, the priority is to convert cooperation frameworks such as TRUST into domestic capability through co-development, localisation, skills accumulation, and technology transfer where politically and commercially available, since capability is what ultimately relaxes the constraint. On the normative front, more consistent articulation of sovereignty principles, coupled with expanded humanitarian and reconstruction engagement with Ukraine, would reduce the reputational cost the strategy carries. Across all four areas, the primary logic is the same. Because India's autonomy is limited by material constraint, its long-term credibility depends on shrinking that constraint rather than on diplomatic positioning alone. Section 9 concludes.

9. Conclusion

This article set out to explain India's conduct during NATO's eastern enlargement and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and in particular its decision to stay out of the Western sanctions regime against Russia while continuing to engage Moscow and Kyiv. It argued that this conduct is best understood as materially constrained hedging: risk-management behaviour undertaken to preserve strategic autonomy within asymmetric material limits that India could neither ignore nor quickly overcome. Against the two established readings of India's policy, the pragmatic-neutrality reading and the normative-inconsistency reading, the article showed that each captures one aspect of a single underlying condition, and that the constraint-based account explains why the same conduct appears as principled autonomy from New Delhi and as inconsistency from the West.

The three research questions are answered in turn. NATO's enlargement and the deterioration of Russia-West relations formed the antecedent conditions, and the 2022 invasion and the sanctions regime that followed were the acute shock that reached India through its defence, energy, and China-related vulnerabilities. The decision to stay out of Western sanctions is best explained by material constraint, and the evidence supports this unevenly: defence vulnerability and energy-price exposure received strong contemporaneous support, the China-related consideration received qualified support, and the ideational-legacy and commercial explanations each account for a genuine part of the picture. In contrast, the material account explains the most. The strategy's future sustainability depends on how a small set of measurable conditions evolve, and it grows more secure as the material constraints that bound it shrink.

The contribution is threefold and bounded by the limits of a single-case design. The article refines the construct of materially constrained hedging by specifying the mechanism through which differing adjustment costs narrow a hedging state's policy space, and by distinguishing the severity of constraint by the cost of adjustment rather than the volume of exchange. It illustrates the analytical value of ordering realism, balance-of-threat logic, and asymmetric interdependence, with the distinction between vulnerability and sensitivity carrying much of the explanatory weight. And, it provides an explicit within-case trace linking contemporaneously recognized constraints to India's post-2022 policy. These claims rest on analytical, not statistical, generalization. Whether the construct travels to other Global South states that adopted comparable postures is a question this study makes askable and that comparative work can settle.

The wider implication follows from the thesis itself. The Ukraine conflict clarified India's strategic autonomy more than it weakened it, revealing that the doctrine's credibility rests on the material capabilities that stand behind it. A hedging strategy preserves room for maneuver only while the dependencies that constrain it remain manageable. India's autonomy will therefore remain credible to the degree that it reduces its defence and energy vulnerabilities, builds domestic capability, and manages its external exposure, turning a posture now sustained by circumstance into one secured by capacity.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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