India’s Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World

GS-II – International relations - India's foreign policy: Evolution, principles, priorities, strategic partnerships and alliances; India's role in global governance.

Why in news?

The 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin unfolded under the shadow of shifting power equations.

What is strategic autonomy?

- **Definition** – It refers to a nation’s ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy and defence without being constrained by external pressures or alliance obligations.
- **Implies independence** – It is not synonymous with isolationism or neutrality rather, it implies flexibility, independence and the capacity to engage with multiple powers on one’s own terms.
- **Middle path –** Strategic autonomy offers a middle path between rigid bloc politics and passive disengagement.
- It demands deft diplomacy, institutional resilience, and a clear-eyed understanding of national interest.
- **Pursuit of strategic autonomy** – It is no longer a theoretical aspiration whereas, it’s a daily diplomatic practice, fraught with complexity and consequence.
- Autonomy need be redefined — not as isolation, but as resilience and adaptability.

What are the challenges for India in maintaining strategic autonomy?

- **Accelerating global power shifts –** As global power shifts accelerate and traditional alliances fray, India finds itself navigating a delicate path between competing giants: the United States, China and Russia.
- **Fragmented world order** – The unipolar moment of American dominance

has given way to a fragmented world order.

- **Fluid and unpredictable environment** – China's assertiveness, Russia's revisionism and the West's internal divisions creates a fluid and unpredictable environment.
- **Issues with US** – The Trump administration's erratic trade policies, followed by stinging tariffs and sanctions in his second term, have strained economic ties.
- **Disputes with China** – Aggressive actions, particularly along the shared border, its dominated regional order and economic competition directly threaten India's national security and sphere of influence.
- **Concerns with Russia** – Growing closeness to Beijing and its global isolation following the Ukraine conflict making it harder for India to maintain a balanced relationship with the West.
- **Domestic factors** – Political polarisation, economic vulnerabilities and institutional constraints can limit the effectiveness of autonomous decision-making.
- **Technological interdependence** – The global economy is increasingly interdependent, and technological ecosystems are dominated by a few players that will leads to overdependence on foreign countries.

What are the approaches followed by India?

- **Measured response** – It continues to engage with the U.S., maintains independent positions on global conflicts and insists on the primacy of national interest over ideological alignment.
- **Cautious engagement and firm deterrence** – It strengthens border infrastructure, deepens ties with Indo-Pacific partners, and invests in indigenous defence capabilities.
- **Resisting confrontation and capitulation** – By asserting sovereignty and refusing to be another country's counterweight by controlling Chinese access to the Indian economy and simultaneously keeping channels of communication open.
- **Preserve freedom** - From Nehru's non-alignment during the Cold War to the Modi government's "multi-alignment" in the current era -
- The successive governments have sought to preserve India's freedom of action while adapting to changing geopolitical realities.
- **Hedging** – India employs a "hedging" strategy, engaging with multiple powers to minimize risks and retain diplomatic independence rather than fully aligning with one power.

Hedging, *here, refers to a foreign policy strategy where a state cultivates a middle-ground, flexible position to avoid choosing between competing great powers, instead seeking to maximize benefits from all sides by forming a combination of cooperation and caution*

- **Technological and digital** – It encompasses data sovereignty, digital infrastructure and supply chain security.
- India's recent efforts to build indigenous platforms, secure critical minerals and assert its voice in global tech governance are some of the steps in this direction.

What need to be done for maintaining India's strategic autonomy?

- **Multi-alignment –** Rather than isolation, India pursues a multi-alignment strategy, building partnerships with diverse countries to enhance its agency and influence in a multipolar world.
- **Clear definition of national interest** – India could consistently articulate its core interests - territorial integrity, economic growth, technological advancement, and regional stability and ensure all foreign engagements align with these.
- **Engaging with global forums** – It participates in multilateral forums such as BRICS, SCO, IMEC, Quad, etc. and engaging with multiple nations play a balancing role without engaging into errands.
- **Need for stronger capabilities** – To maintain its standing, India need to make investment in its domestic defence production and deep-tech start-ups to secure its borders and assert its interests.
- **Economic and technological resilience** – Diversify trade partnerships and promote digital sovereignty by investing in indigenous tech infrastructure to avoid overdependence on foreign countries.
- **Cultural and soft power projection** – Leverage India's rich heritage, democratic values and global diaspora to shape narratives and build goodwill.
- **For shifting global order** – India needs to continue steadily to walk the tightrope — engaging with the U.S. without becoming a vassal, deterring China without provoking war, and partnering with Russia without inheriting its isolation.

Conclusion:

- Strategic autonomy is not just a slogan. It is a strategy - the art of

navigating a turbulent world without losing one’s bearings.

- In doing so, India does not reject the world — it reclaims its agency within it.
- Strategic autonomy is not about standing alone; it is about standing straight, and standing tall.

Reference

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