

India between the West and Russia

Exploring the Constraints of India's Foreign and Security Policy

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PICTURE

Title: Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi welcomes President of Russia, Vladimir Putin for the 21st India-Russia Annual Summit

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ABSTRACT

India, the world's most populous democracy and a rising great power, has maintained a neutral stance towards Russia's war on Ukraine despite strengthening ties with the US and the West. This paper employs the Balance of Threat Theory to explain India's behavior: India's balancing act between the West and Russia is a calculated strategy to effectively manage its security concerns. India, threatened by China and Pakistan, requires cooperation with both Russia and the US for its internal and external balancing. Russia provides India with arms and energy imports, while the US is the most viable partner against China. Moreover, India must maintain its relationship with Russia to avoid further Sino-Russian alignment. Because India is indispensable to US balancing efforts against China, it does not face political consequences for its neutral stance. These findings underscore the need to consider India's geopolitical and security imperatives for understanding its foreign policy.

KEY WORDS

India, Balance of Threat, India-US-China-Pakistan, India-Russia Relations, Indo-Pacific

INDIA'S NEUTRAL STANCE

India is emerging as a key player in the international order, driven by its economic potential, favourable demographics, and military significance in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India is regarded as the world's largest democracy – even though institutions like Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) categorize India as an “electoral autocracy” (Nord et al. 2024: 17). Although India has moved closer to the United States of America (US) and other Western states, it has not clearly positioned itself internationally. India's ambiguous stance on Russia's war against Ukraine is evident in its abstention from multiple United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, as well as its refusal to publicly condemn or sanction Russia. This puts India in a strange position: It demonstrates inconsistency in upholding the rules-based order, is at odds with the position of its main international partners and “leaves India in the company of strange bedfellows such as China and Pakistan, which happen to be India's adversaries and have behaved toward India as Russia has toward Ukraine” (Tellis 2022). Therefore, the question arises, why does India take a neutral stance on Russia's war against Ukraine?

To address the question, it is necessary to review the existing literature on India's foreign security policy and specify its “neutral stance”. Jacob (2022b) argues that India's “indirect support to the Russian position” (Jacob 2022b) is not the result of dependence on or pressure from Russia, nor India's position on international norms, but rather its calculation to protect its interests. The primary rationale is geopolitical: India's strategic vulnerability could increase with China's rise and potential alignments between China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia. Additionally, non-alignment also remains important in India's strategic culture.

In contrast, Grare (2022) asserts that India's stance does not indicate support for Russia; rather, it includes indirect criticism of Russia in Indian statements and should not be seen as a non-aligned policy. India is working to move away from Russia, but faces constraints in doing so, leading to its position on Russia's war on Ukraine. India seeks to preserve its partnership with Russia, prevent a Sino-Russian alignment, and avoid collateral damage from Western states. This behaviour reflects the complex balance of power between India, Russia, and China. Grare's argument aligns with Borah

(2022), who highlights the historical Indio-Russian ties, particularly in arms sales and energy. India remains dependent on Russian arms imports, despite the declining importance of Indo-Russian relations and India's diversification of arms imports. Those imports are also desirable due to their affordability and Russia's willingness to supply advanced weapons (Tellis 2022). Given India's concerns about China and the calculus that the US are more dependent on India in the Indo-Pacific rather than vice versa, India is taking the potentially risky position regarding Russia and Ukraine (Borah 2022).

Verma (2023 a, b) classifies India's behaviour as neutral. He argues that strong Indo-Russian relations help mitigate India's security concerns, particularly regarding China and Pakistan (Verma 2023a). Verma (2023b) further emphasizes the concept of multi-alignment—aligning with various strategic partners on different issues to maximize strategic autonomy and interests. Russia remains crucial due to the path dependency in arms sales and its willingness to supply advanced weapons. However, as Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China, India is pursuing closer ties with the US. This multi-alignment strategy is linked to India's ambition for great power status, as prominently outlined in the Indian Foreign Secretary's grand strategy in *The India Way* (Jaishankar 2020).

Many scholars agree that China as India's main threat, the concept of strategic autonomy, India's multipolar worldview and its historical ties with and arms dependence on Russia are key factors for India's stance (Jaffrelot 2022; Shah/Pachaly 2022; O'Donnell/Vasudeva 2022; Lieberherr 2022; Gettleman/Mashal 2022). Jaffrelot (2022) also argues constructively by highlighting the role of anti-Western sentiment among Indian elites. Shah and Pachaly (2022) emphasize the positive public sentiment toward Russia in India and domestic political support for the government's stance. Gettleman and Mashal (2022) suggest that India sees an opportunity to enhance its international standing by potentially acting as a mediator in the conflict. Barrow and von Hooft (2022) argue in terms of liberal international relations (IR) theory, noting the ruling BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology, which informs an 'India first' geopolitical strategy. Additionally, Liebherr (2022) underscores economic considerations, pointing out that India's need for sustained economic growth makes its relationship

with Russia valuable, particularly through access to discounted Russian oil.

Scholars provide varying terms and explanations for India's behaviour: some describe India's position as strategic ambivalence (Krishnan 2022), others as public neutrality (Tellis 2022), and some as a balancing act (Jacob 2022). Neutrality – mostly associated with non-involvement in military conflicts and non-alignment (Gärtner 2023: 49) – does not fully capture India's stance, which some consider a “subtle pro-Moscow position” (Jacob 2022a). This paper uses the term neutral stance, which is related to neutrality but also to represent an active policy choice. Looking at the debate through the lens of IR theories, neorealist arguments are most prominent, while some constructivist and liberalist arguments also exist. However, the application of neorealist theory to explain India's behaviour varies significantly: While India's actions are interpreted as balancing, driven by security concerns, there is ambiguity over whether India is a rising hegemon (emphasis on multi-alignment) or a status quo power with significant vulnerability and dependence (emphasis on strategic autonomy). Despite numerous explanations, a clear research gap remains.

The paper provides a theory-based analysis of India's neutral stance, using the neorealist Balance of Threat Theory. Given that the objective of the paper is to address the research gap regarding neorealist arguments, the research design does not encompass liberalist, institutionalist and constructivist approaches. The paper is structured into three sections: The first outlines the theoretical framework, the central empirical argument, and the research design. The empirical analysis assesses India's threat perception, and its internal and external balancing considerations. The concluding section synthesizes the findings, discussing the theoretical and methodological framework, and draws a conclusion on why India takes a neutral stance on Russia's war against Ukraine.

BALANCING AGAINST THREATS

The neorealist Balance of Threat Theory is best suited to answer the research question and explain India's neutral stance. Applying the logic of structural realism to foreign policy analysis means focusing on the structural incentives or constraints on foreign policy behaviour. While structural constraints do not fully explain foreign policy,

neorealism challenges the idea of national uniqueness in foreign policy, providing a heuristic tool to critically assess prevailing narratives and self-perceptions of countries (Wivel 2018: 523). Therefore, a structural neorealist approach can provide a distinction in the discourse surrounding India's foreign policy. Within structural realism, the Balance of Threat Theory is explicitly designed to analyse foreign policy, in particular patterns of alliance formation (Walt 1987: 1). It can be regarded as a "defensive realist foreign policy model" (Wivel 2018: 522), which follows the defensive logic of states as status-quo powers, as opposed to the offensive logic of revisionist states (Wivel 2018: 522-523). This distinction allows to clarify whether India's neutral stance results from dependency or follows the logic of strategic autonomy or multi-alignment - addressing the research gap.

This paper formulates a central empirical argument to guide the empirical analysis by stating the premises of neorealist theory, explaining the main arguments of the Balance of Threat Theory, and applying these theoretical considerations to India's neutral stance. At the fundamental level of structural realist theory, states are the main unitary actors in a world defined by anarchy, which is structured by the distribution of certain resources. Capabilities are the most significant resources as they determine the power of states. Each state's primary concern is its own survival because cooperation is limited by anarchy and states must therefore maximize their relative gains in a self-help system (Waltz 1979: 88, 96-97, 192, 105-106, 118).

According to Walt, states do not balance against power, but against threats (Walt 1987: 263). The formation of alliances or balancing occurs when there is a perceived threat disparity—when one state or coalition appears significantly more threatening than others. The threat level is determined by aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions, though the significance of these factors varies by context (Walt 1987: 26). Aggregate power encompasses elements like population size, economic and military strength, and technological advancement, which collectively compose a state's potential threat level. Geographic proximity also plays a crucial role, the closer a state, the greater the threat. Offensive capabilities—defined by a state's potential to compromise another's sovereignty and territorial integrity—further contribute to the

assessment. Lastly, a state's aggressive intentions are key to determining its threat perception (Walt 1987: 22–26).

To ensure their survival, states behave rationally by maximizing gains and minimizing costs (Walt 1986: 331). They opt for balancing rather than bandwagoning—aligning with a potential threat for security is risky due to the uncertainty of others' intentions. Balancing involves both aligning with other states (external balancing) and bolstering one's own economic and military capabilities (internal balancing), adhering to Waltz's distinction between internal and external strategies. Internal balancing focuses on enhancing a state's own power resources, while external balancing involves forming or strengthening alliances and potentially weakening rival coalitions (Walt 1987: 28, 29, 263; Waltz 1979: 118). Although internal measures are more reliable, they are limited by a state's economic and military capacity, making external alliances decisive for effective balancing (Mearsheimer 2014: 157).

To address the research question, it's crucial to combine the theoretical framework with findings of the existing literature, leading to the central empirical argument of this paper: India's neutral stance is cost-benefit sensitive, as it allows it to continue cooperating with both the US and Russia, which is necessary to enable effective internal and external balancing against the powerful imbalanced threat by China and Pakistan.

CONCEPTUALISING BALANCE OF THREAT AND BALANCING BEHAVIOUR

The empirical argument founded by theory requires further conceptualisation to develop a clear-cut research design. The main concept to specify is power, as "the concept of power is central to realist theory, yet there is still little agreement on how it should be conceived and measured" (Walt 2002: 222). Walt distinguishes in aggregate and offensive power, similarly to Mearsheimer's distinction in latent and military power. Here the realist view prevails, that "war-fighting ability is the essence of state power" (Schmidt 2007: 62).

India's balance of threat is assessed by operationalizing each contributing factor: Aggregate power is measured by data on population size, gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of economic strength, the GDP per capita as a measure of economic productivity, and the number of

military personnel, military spending, and nuclear weapons. These raw data points are contextualized by considering technological advancements, weapon system quality, and the overall structure and efficiency of the military (Mearsheimer 2014: 55, 62, 63, 134). Geographic proximity is evaluated through the physical distance between states and the extent of shared borders. Offensive capabilities are defined by military posture, encompassing all assets deployable against India. The analysis extends to examining the offense-defense balance by comparing these capabilities against India's defensive strengths, incorporating geographic and technological considerations (Jervis 1978: 194-199). Given India's nuclear arsenal, the paper adheres to the neorealist premise of mutual assured destruction, suggesting nuclear capabilities deter rather than escalate conflicts (Mearsheimer 2016: 130-131). Hence, detailed nuclear strategies are excluded from the analysis. Aggressive intention, in Walt's understanding, refers to the perception of aggressive intention while ignoring signaling of benign intentions (Rathbun 2007: 538). Analysing offensive capabilities, military doctrine and military and security policy related behavior allows conclusions on perceived aggressive intentions (Yarhi-Milo 2014: 27-31, 256, 257).

To assess whether India needs to maintain cooperation with both Russia and the US, India's internal and external balancing calculations and constraints are analysed. In accordance with the "elements of national power approach" (Schmidt 2007: 56) of structural realism, the focus of internal balancing is on resources that enhance economic growth and military build-up. A narrow focus on military power alone is insufficient, as economic growth is a critical foundation for military armament. While many internal economic efforts by states are abstracted by neorealist theory, structural dependencies on other states matter as they extend beyond unit-level and influence the basis for India's economic and ultimately military power.

It is not possible to specify these dependencies using theory; rather, they must be identified based on the findings of the existing literature, which indicates that energy dependence is especially important for India's economic growth, while dependence on arms imports is crucial for India's military capabilities. External balancing must be viewed from two perspectives: India needs to ensure that threatening states do not become more

powerful through alliances, and ideally even weaken their alignment system. Simultaneously, India must form a balancing coalition with states opposing the same threat, ensuring that this coalition collectively achieves at least power parity or superiority.

INDIA'S IMBALANCE OF THREAT

India faces a great imbalance of threat. While it is more powerful than most of its neighbours combined, China and Pakistan pose serious military threats. In contrast, despite their considerable aggregate power, the United States and Russia do not pose a threat to India, lacking both offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions towards it. This imbalance creates a need for India to react with balancing against China and Pakistan. Thus, India's foreign policy behaviour is heavily influenced by this structural constraint. Consequently, an analysis of India's balance of threat represents the initial step in understanding its stance towards Russia and Ukraine.

India's Position and Capabilities

India is a powerful state, with comparatively high economic output and military capabilities in its region. It is the world's most populous country and ranks as the fifth largest economy in terms of nominal GDP (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2024). It contributes nearly 8% to global GDP by purchasing power parity (IMF 2024), maintains a stockpile of an estimated 164 nuclear warheads, and possesses the second-largest active military force globally (see Table 1). Consequently, only few states present a threat to India: Apart from India, China and Pakistan are by far the most powerful countries in the region, while Russia and the US have economic and military capabilities that influence South Asia (Nadkarni 2010: 1-2, see Table 1).

India's military is heavily focused on its borders with Pakistan and China. An estimated 40 per cent of its nearly 1.5 million military personnel are stationed close to its northern border with China and its western border with Pakistan, while also maintaining counterinsurgency capabilities (Singh 2021). Furthermore, the Indian Air Force has 800 fighter jets and 150 helicopters (The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) 2022: 265-270), with a focus on China and Pakistan. The second military priority for India is its coast and the Indian Ocean, where India holds a geographical advantage and has 137 ships and submarines, 291 fighter

Table 1: Distribution of Aggregate Power

	India	Pakistan	Russia	China	USA
Population size (2024, in million)	1,440	236	142	1,410	337
GDP (2024, in billion US\$, current prices)	3,940	338	2,060	18,530	28,780
GDP per capita (2024, in US\$, current prices)	2,730	1,460	14,390	13,140	85,370
Military expenditure (2023, in current US\$, in million)	83,575	8,521	109,454	296,439	916,015
Active military personnel (2022)	1,460,350	651,800	900,000	2,035,000	1,395,350
Nuclear warheads (2023)	164	170	5,889	410	5,244

Data: International Monetary Fund (2024), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024), The International Institute for Security Studies (2022), Arms Control Association (2024).

aircraft and an aircraft carrier (Klimann et al 2019: 5–6). Moreover, the Indian coastguard assists the IN with further 115 coastal patrol boats and offshore patrol vessels, and over 50 patrol planes and helicopters (Tellis 2020: 144).

India has territorial disputes with four countries. Its conflicts with Bangladesh and Bhutan remain peaceful and devoid of military confrontations. In contrast, border disputes with China and Pakistan have historically escalated to wars (with Pakistan in 1947 and 1965; with China in 1962) and continue to provoke significant conflicts (with Pakistan in 1999; with China in 1975 and 2020) and ongoing skirmishes (as of 2022). The dispute over Kashmir represents the world's most militarized border conflict (Central Intelligence Agency 2022). Control over Kashmir is divided: Pakistan holds Gilgit-Baltistan, China occupies Aksai Chin, and India governs Jammu and Kashmir, including Ladakh—though China effectively controls parts of Ladakh from the Line of Actual Control (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2022). India perceives these territorial disputes and the associated military enforcement as aggressive, given India's assertion of sovereignty over all of Kashmir (Wagner/Stanzel 2020: 2).

The Main Threat: China

China poses the biggest threat to India. As indicated in Table 1, China, with a comparable population to India, has a much larger economy: Its GDP and productivity, measured by GDP per capita, are about five times higher than that of India. China's military has an estimated 410 nuclear warheads, more personnel, and more than triple India's defence spending (see Table 1), creating an asymmetric balance of power. The basis for China's military capabilities is its strong military-industrial base, which enables it to produce advanced equipment in enormous quantities and for all areas (IISS 2022: 255). In addition, China's military is technologically more advanced than India's, has a more efficient organisational structure and superior interrelated capabilities (Mastro/Tarapore 2020: 235-239). China's primary military attention is not directed towards India. However, its military rivalry with India manifests in two primary areas: a strategic competition in the Indian Ocean and ongoing tensions along the 4,100-kilometer border, including territorial disputes in Ladakh and conflicts within the Indian state of Sikkim (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2022).

China demonstrated aggressive intentions in 2020 by annexing 1,000 km² along the 1959 borders, previously under Indian control (Wagner/Stanzel

2020: 6). However, China's strategic documents, such as the 2019 Defense White Paper, downplay this conflict, emphasizing cooperation instead (Anand 2021). Yet, the objective "to safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security" and "to safeguard China's overseas interests" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2019: 6) implicitly applies to India due to the territorial conflict. Despite this, India is not viewed as a primary security threat by China, which focuses more on Taiwan and the South China Sea (Mastro/Tarapore 2020: 235-236).

The offence-defence balance between China and India remains highly context-dependent and can be described as "asymmetric but even" (Mastro/Tarapore 2020: 235). The military relationship between China and India is asymmetrical, as China has far more military power overall. But the Himalayan terrain, acting as a natural barrier, levels the playing field since conventional warfare is impossible. China benefits from superior positioning on the Tibetan Plateau, providing strategic advantages over India's lower territories (Kliman et al. 2019: 10-11). Alongside 40,000 troops near the Indian border, China also positions significant People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces and aerial capabilities in the region, although not solely intended for conflict with India. Despite these strengths, India maintains a quantitative advantage in local conventional forces and a superior air position (O'Donnell/Bollfass 2020: 8-10). In the Indian Ocean, China's Belt and Road Initiative, its China Pakistan Economic Corridor, and Maritime Silk Road have military components and create the String of Pearls of military bases, surrounding India. Despite the PLA Navy's global reach and its use of foreign ports for potential military activities (Department of Defense 2022a: 50, 144), India retains a strategic advantage as of 2019 (Kliman et al. 2019: 6-8).

In conclusion, while China possesses extensive offensive capabilities targeted at India, local power parity exists in some areas. Nonetheless, China's overall advantage in aggregated power, its broader military modernization and infrastructure investments is likely to shift the offensive-defensive balance in China's favour (Kliman et al. 2019: 8 f.), which will enhance the threat to India.

The Old Enemy: Pakistan

Pakistan, India's historic adversary, also represents a threat to India. It ranks second in aggregate power among India's neighbours after China. With a population of 236 million and a GDP of US\$ 338 billion, it boasts 651,800 active military personnel and spends annually US\$ 8,521 million on its military (see Table 1). Despite having an estimated 170 nuclear warheads, Pakistan's capabilities are significantly outmatched by India's. Pakistan has demonstrated clear aggressive intentions towards India, with all three wars between the nations initiated by Pakistani strategies (Tarapore 2022: 407). In 2020, Pakistan solidified its claims in Kashmir by publishing a new map (Wagner/Stenzel 2020: 5), reflecting a revisionist stance towards the region (Singh 2022: 125). Pakistan's military doctrine, developed in response to India's Cold Start strategy, includes the New Concepts of War Fighting, which emphasizes quicker mobilization than India and incorporates offensive elements to address various threats, including those related to Kashmir (Sood 2017: 3-4).

Despite its comparatively lower aggregate power—with an economy and military expenditure seven times smaller than that of India—Pakistan maintains a well-equipped and trained military, primarily geared towards India, and largely outfitted with Chinese hardware (IISS 2022: 269). It benefits from a strategic partnership with China, enhancing military interoperability and joint operations, forming a Sino-Pakistani strategic nexus (Pant/Bommakanti 2019: 837).

The military balance is offset in specific border areas due to Pakistan's focused deployment against India, while India must allocate its resources between China and Pakistan. However, the challenging geography of the border favours the defender, with formidable natural defences in the Himalayas to the north and well-established lines of defence along the rest. While India maintains air superiority, it lacks complete air dominance. In the Indian Ocean, India's naval superiority allows it to dominate Pakistan's coastline, though this holds limited strategic value in the broader ground-focused conflict (Tarapore 2022: 411-413). Pakistan's military capabilities, while comparatively inferior, nevertheless constitute a considerable threat to India, due to the strategic and geographical factors at play.

Outside Powers: The US and Russia

Despite geographical distances, both the US and Russia remain potent military powers but pose lesser threats to India. Russia, with an estimated 5,889 nuclear warheads, exceeds India in military spending and productivity (see Table 1). However, Russia's capability diminishes with distance, and its forces in Central Asia primarily focus on China rather than projecting power towards India (IISS 2022: 182, 208; Szálkai 2020). The US economy is seven times larger than India's, with a military budget eleven times higher and an estimated 5,244 nuclear warheads (see Table 1). While it maintains the world's most formidable military, capable of global projection (IISS 2022: 48), its primary focus in the Indo-Pacific towards China does not directly threaten India. There are no military bases in the immediate vicinity and no offensive capabilities targeted at India (Congressional Research Service 2022: 7-8). Instead, the US National Defense Strategy envisions India as a partner in countering China in the region (Department of Defense 2022b: 15). One might advance a counterargument regarding the historical context of US-Pakistan military cooperation. Although these ties were perceived as a threat to India's security, the current stance of the US is shaped by its competition with China, which is the pivotal factor in global politics. It can therefore be assumed that the US will not pose a threat to India in the foreseeable future. In summary, neither Russia nor the US have significant offensive intentions or capabilities directed at India, positioning them as distant stakeholders.

INDIA'S NEED FOR BALANCING

India faces massive challenges along its nearly 6,000 kilometres of borders with China and Pakistan, two states that pose significant threats. Despite a balanced offense-defence equation against both neighbours and robust defensive capabilities, two factors intensify the threat level. First, China's overwhelming power and higher military spending allow it to outpace India in terms of armament and military modernization. Second, the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, particularly evident since 2015 in Kashmir through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, part of the expansive Belt and Road Initiative, underscores the geopolitical challenge for India (Wagner/Stanzel 2020: 5). The collaboration between China and Pakistan in Kashmir may signal a concerted effort to constrain

India, hypothetically leading to a two-front conflict (Bommakanti 2019). Although India has strategies in place for such a scenario, it is constrained by limited resources, leaving its military ill-prepared for a potential simultaneous conflict with both nations (Mastro/Tarapore 2020: 237). This precarious situation emphasizes the critical need for India to engage in balancing behaviour to mitigate these significant threats, heavily influencing India's foreign policy choices.

INTERNAL BALANCING

This paper focuses on India's balancing behaviour to assess how this threat situation effects its stance on Russia's war on Ukraine. Starting with internal balancing, this paper attains a more comprehensive understanding of its foreign policy decisions by analysing constraints and structural interdependencies. This includes an assessment of whether India's collaboration with Russia is vital for strengthening its economic and military capabilities.

The constraints on economic growth

Economic growth is essential for India's balancing as economic limitations have historically restricted military budget allocations, confining enhancements primarily to internal security and border defence (Tellis 2020: 119). India's large domestic market insulates it from global trade fluctuations. In 2019, international trade accounted for only 18.4% of its GDP, well below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, illustrating a lower dependency on international trade compared to other emerging markets (The World Bank 2022; OECD 2023).

In contrast, a primary constraint on India's economic growth is its energy dependency. It is the world's third-largest energy consumer, and its energy mix is dominated by coal, oil, and biomass. 80% of its coal is domestically produced, yet it imports half of its natural gas and three-quarters of its oil. Renewable sources comprise a mere 7% of its energy consumption, which underscores a vital dependency on external energy supplies (International Energy Agency 2021). India's energy sector is deeply intertwined with Russian companies, which highlights a critical aspect of its economic constraints. Historically, India has engaged with Russia in nuclear energy development. Notably, the Kudankulam nuclear

power plants, two of which are operational and two under construction since 2016, exemplify this partnership. Russia not only contributes to the construction of nuclear power plants but also provides significant financing, and negotiations for eight additional reactors have been finalized (World Nuclear Association 2021). Russia's support extends to supplying uranium for other international nuclear projects that India undertakes with countries like the US and France (Balachandran 2010: 87). Given that India was the world's largest importer of uranium from 2018 to 2020, Russia's role as a key supplier underscores India's reliance on Russian nuclear resources (World Integrated Trade Solution 2019; 2022).

In the fossil fuel and hydrocarbon sector, the relationship is equally substantial. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation made significant investments in Russia's hydrocarbon resources, totalling about \$12 billion between 2000 and 2014, with continuing investments thereafter. Conversely, Russian firm Rosneft acquired a major stake in India's Essar port and refinery, controlling approximately 9% of all Indian refinery output (Raghavan 2016: 304). Additionally, Indian investments in Russian oil fields since 2016 exceed \$4.2 billion, further cementing this interdependency spanning decades due to the long operational life of oil and gas fields (Kasturi 2022). The strong bilateral cooperation is economically beneficial, annually generating substantial profits for Indian energy companies. Moreover, since 2022, India benefits heavily from inexpensive Russian oil imports, which are essential for sustaining its high economic growth rates (Cohen 2022).

The enduring energy ties with Russia are pivotal for India as it seeks to bolster its internal capabilities in the face of external threats from China and Pakistan. It is worth noting that India's economy and its capacity for internal balancing are constrained by additional factors. One illustrative example is India's technology dependence on China (The Economist, 2024). Nevertheless, the literature indicates that the role of energy ties with Russia are pivotal for India's neutral stance towards Russia's war against Ukraine. This paper has demonstrated that this argument is theoretically sound and empirically robust.

Constraints of military armament

India needs imports and collaborations, especially with Russia, for effective internal balancing

(Mastro/Trapatore 2020: 237-238). Its defence sector, characterized by a state-dominated, monopolistic structure, heavily relies on foreign technology, particularly from Russia. While India has sought to diversify its military partnerships, entering joint ventures with the US, France, and Israel, the ties with Russian suppliers remain strong. Notable is the BrahMos missile project, developed with Russian expertise (Mastro/Trapatore 2020: 237-238). Despite the India-US Defense Technology and Trade Initiative launched in 2012, anticipated technology transfers and joint productions have failed to materialize. Although India increasingly imports military equipment from France and the US, Russian arms remain significant in its arsenal (IISS 2022: 227, 265-266).

Historically, from 1960 to 1990, India benefited from low-conditionality Russian arms worth \$30 billion, followed by \$70 billion in imports post-1991, which included advanced systems like nuclear submarines and air defence mechanisms. Consequently, up to 85% of India's major weapons systems originate from Russia, reflecting a strong path dependency. This reliance is further cemented by the longevity of Russian systems, some weapons systems extending till 2050 or 2060, and Russia's readiness to share advanced technology (Lalwani et al. 2021: 3, 28-29). Although recent years have seen a diversification in arms sourcing—evidenced by a reduction in imports from Russia and a notable increase from France in 2021—Russia still surpasses other countries in total arms supplied to India over the last decade by a significant margin (SIPRI 2022b). This enduring dependence on Russian military support illustrates that internal balancing and military armament can therefore only be achieved through continued cooperation with Russia.

EXTERNAL BALANCING

India's capacity to pursue external balancing is constrained by several factors, which in turn shape its foreign policy choices and hence its neutral stance towards Russia's war on Ukraine. This paper argues that two issues are crucial for India's alignment strategy: forming a coalition robust enough to counter the combined power of China and Pakistan and weakening or containing China's and - to a lesser extent - Pakistan's alliance system.

India's Balancing Coalition

Finding powerful allies is crucial for India, which is economically and militarily outspent by the combined forces of China and Pakistan. Russia has neither the necessary aggregate power nor the immediate and sufficient power projection capabilities to South Asia to be a useful ally. Aligning with the United States and its allies is the best strategy for countering China's regional dominance, as none of the potential partners within South Asia suffice in matching the needed aggregate power. This alliance notably includes Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand—all bound by security treaties with the US and possessing significant economic and military capacities (The White House 2022: 9). Moreover, the US and its partners also see China as a threat, which stabilizes the balancing coalition.

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, alongside the US, Japan, and Australia, fits into a neorealist framework of maximizing security through strategic partnerships. These relationships are strengthened by bilateral agreements, particularly with the US, which offer access to advanced military technology and joint training opportunities that are crucial for enhancing India's defensive capabilities (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs 2021). This underscores the necessity of cooperation with the United States and its allies. Collaboration with other partners, including Russia, would not be an optimal strategy for achieving effective external balancing, which constitutes a crucial element in explaining India's neutral stance.

Balancing against the China-Russia alignment

To effectively balance against its threats, it is imperative that India strategically prevents its greatest threat, China, from forming or strengthening alliances. China has no fixed alignment partners and no alliance system. Military cooperation with Pakistan is no exception. However, such partnerships have the potential to increase India's threat situation. Moreover, relations between China and Russia have improved since 2014 and there is a Sino-Russian alignment. This partnership manifests itself through arms trade, technology transfer, joint military exercises, and cooperation on satellite systems. It is directed against the Western world order (Bergmann/Lohnsen 2022: 1-2) and operates independently from the political contexts in South

Asia. In addition to military cooperation, China is also providing diplomatic support to Russia amidst its war on Ukraine (Department of Defense 2022a: 143). This Sino-Russian cooperation intensifies the strategic challenges for India, as any military or technological gains by China through Russia could enhance its regional power. Additionally, economic ties between Russia and China have grown, especially as Russia seeks to reduce its economic reliance on the West (Lukin 2021: 365-366). Following the European Union's distancing from Russia due to the Ukrainian conflict and subsequent sanctions, Russia has become increasingly dependent on China and India for economic support, with oil sales being crucial. These dynamics suggest that any deterioration in Indo-Russian relations might inadvertently bolster Sino-Russian ties. Therefore, India's neutral stance on Russia's war against Ukraine, including its decision not to join Western sanctions, is a calculated move for external balancing to avoid empowering the Sino-Russian axis further.

CONCLUSION

The core argument of this paper is that India's neutral stance on Russia's war on Ukraine is rational, given its security and balancing constraints. Looking at India's threat balance, this study argues that China, with more total power, strong offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions in its border conflicts, is India's main threat. In addition, Pakistan also has offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions, while cooperating closely with China militarily, making it also a relevant threat. Taken together, India is seriously threatened and needs to balance against these two states. India's strategy involves a balancing act necessitated by its dependencies on energy and arms imports, notably from Russia, and the imperative to forge a powerful coalition to counteract China's ascendancy while also preventing further Sino-Russian strategic closeness. The dual necessity to sustain relations with both Russia for critical resources and the US for strategic military balance underscores India's complex geopolitical manoeuvring, leading to its neutral stance on Russia's war on Ukraine.

India's neutral stance is at odds with American and Western interests; however, India's importance to the US in balancing against China means it does not face any repercussions for its position. China must spread its capabilities because it has to allocate

considerable resources near to the bordering, powerful and militarily capable India. This unique position is unmatched by any other country in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the neutral stance is a very cost-sensitive strategy, allowing continued cooperation with the two indispensable partners, by implicitly supporting Russia – diplomatically and economically - without alienating the US.

The results demonstrate that the balance of threat theory provides an accurate explanation of India's behaviour. India's foreign policy options are constrained to a significant extent, which can be characterized as a challenging balancing act. Therefore, the paper demonstrates that India is more preoccupied with safeguarding its strategic autonomy than pursuing a strategy of non- or multi-alignment, which contributes to the research gap within the discourse on India's foreign policy. These findings have implications beyond India's stance on Russia's war against Ukraine, also relating to alliance formation in the Indo-Pacific, and South Asian politics. It can be concluded that the current state of relations between India and Russia is robust. However, in the long term the US is the only suitable partner to balance China and Pakistan - a threat that will not diminish. For Western policymakers, this insight and a deeper understanding of India's security struggle are of paramount importance.

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