



India's Foreign Policy under Modi: Strategic Dimensions of Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic maneuvers in the region of Indo-Pacific as a strategic bid for regional hegemony, primarily to counterbalance China's expanding influence. The research is based on a question how does Modi's leadership style shape India's hedging strategy in its diplomatic engagements with major powers? This study used the process-tracing method to analyse the diplomatic style of Modi. Theory testing approach is applied and tests hypothesis against empirical evidence within a case. Findings reveal a nuanced hedging approach combining deterrence, economic decoupling, and selective cooperation that enhances India's leverage amid Sino-Indian border tensions and Beijing's Belt and Road encroachments. Ultimately, Modi's diplomacy reframes the Indo-Pacific as a multipolar arena, prioritizing national interests like territorial integrity and economic security over outright confrontation. Instead of aligning rigidly with one bloc, Modi projects India as a Civilizational actor and a stakeholder that is capable of engaging diverse partners from US to Japan and ASEAN to Australia on issue specific cooperation. This reframing allows India to pursue economic partnerships, infrastructure connectivity, and defense collaborations while maintaining flexibility in its foreign policy posture. By foregrounding sovereignty and development imperatives, Modi's style positions India as a bridge-builder in the Indo-Pacific contributing to a more pluralistic regional order.

Introduction

Narendra Modi's diplomacy can be read as a fusion of hedging strategies with his distinctive personality traits, producing a foreign policy that is simultaneously pragmatic and performative. Hedging allows India to diversify its alignments engaging the United States through the QUAD, maintaining energy ties with Russia, and cautiously managing relations with China without committing fully to any single camp. Yet this structural logic is animated by Modi's personal style: his assertiveness translates into highly visible summitry and diaspora outreach, his status-seeking drives India's claim to leadership of the Global South, and his risk tolerance enables defiance of Western pressure when national interests demand it. The result is a diplomacy that is not merely cautious balancing but a personalized projection of India's ambition, where hedging is reframed through Modi's traits into a narrative of India as both flexible and indispensable. This interplay of strategy and personality underscores how leader-specific characteristics can intensify or humanize otherwise abstract foreign policy doctrines, making India's hedging under Modi a case of personality-structured pragmatism rather than impersonal statecraft (Feist, 2008, pp. 130-145).¹

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In order to study Modi's hedging strategy through diplomatic measures, the most suitable method would be a mixed-methods analytical framework combining process-tracing with leader-centered foreign policy analysis. Process-tracing allows you to map India's sequential diplomatic choices such as balancing US security cooperation with continued Russian energy imports while identifying causal mechanisms that reveal hedging behavior. At the same time, leader-centered analysis, drawing on personality trait frameworks (e.g., Leadership Trait Analysis or operational code), situates these choices within Modi's assertiveness, risk tolerance, and status-seeking tendencies. By integrating these approaches, you can capture both the structural logic of hedging and the personal imprint of Modi's leadership style. This dual lens highlights how hedging is not simply a systemic necessity but is refracted through Modi's personalized diplomacy, producing a distinctive blend of pragmatic flexibility and performative ambition.

Methodological Consideration

In order to apply process-tracing to Modi's diplomatic style through the lens of hedging theory, the method involves reconstructing the sequence of decisions and events that reveal how India balances competing pressures while reflecting Modi's personal traits. Process-tracing begins by identifying critical junctures moments where India faced competing pressures, such as US expectations for sanctions compliance versus India's continued oil imports from Russia. Each juncture is then analyzed through variables: structural hedging choices (alignment, diversification, security partnerships) and leader-centered traits (assertiveness, risk tolerance, status-seeking). For example, Modi's decision to deepen QUAD cooperation while simultaneously expanding ties with Moscow can be traced as a sequence: external pressure, Modi's risk-tolerant trait, outcome of dual engagement (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023ⁱⁱ). The method requires causal mechanism mapping: linking Modi's traits to the diplomatic measure. Assertiveness may explain the visibility of India's hedging (diaspora rallies alongside strategic deals), while pragmatism accounts for selective silence on China's border aggression. By tracing these mechanisms across cases QUAD, Russian oil, Gulf outreach the analysis shows how hedging is not merely structural balancing but a leader-shaped strategy. Finally, process-tracing allows for pattern recognition: repeated sequences where Modi's traits amplify hedging outcomes. This produces a narrative of personality-structured hedging, where India's diplomatic flexibility is systematically refracted through Modi's personalized style. In academic terms, the method demonstrates how leader-specific variables interact with systemic pressures, making hedging both a strategic necessity and a performative projection of India's ambition.

Diplomacy in multipolar world

By the start of 21st century New Delhi engaged the US cautiously post-1998 nuclear tests and 9/11, culminating in the 2008 civil nuclear deal that recognized India's status and boosted ties. Balancing Russia ties with Western partnerships helped India navigate sanctions and isolation initially. Under Modi, India adopted multi-alignment, forging flexible partnerships like the Quad with the US, Japan, and Australia, while deepening QUAD-EU, BRICS, and SCO engagements. This hedges against China, promotes reforms in global institutions, and positions India as a "middle power" bridging Global South interests with Western alliances. Russia energy imports amid Ukraine tensions exemplify pragmatic autonomy in a fragmented order. India's Indo-Pacific strategy evolved from the "Look East" policy of the 1990s into Modi's proactive "Act East" framework by 2014, integrating economic, defense, and cultural outreach to Southeast Asia and beyond (Mishra, 2017)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Theoretical Framework

Hedging theorization is rooted in the balance of power theory. It is an intermediate strategy on a continuum between the two extremes of balancing and bandwagoning. Hedger's goal is not favoring only one power. Strategy of hedging is the response to the uncertainty over the changing distribution of international power and the future intentions of the rising power. Under uncertainty e.g., power transitions, states hedge toward hegemony by blending balancing (deterrence) and engagement (returns maximization), avoiding entrapment while building capacity, as neoclassical realists argue.

Hedging is basically rooted in structural realism and neoclassical realism, hedging addresses power transition dilemmas, as seen in Asia-Pacific responses to China's rise (Marston, 2024)^{iv}. Domestic factors like leadership shape hedging intensity while systemic uncertainty drives its adoption. It differs from neutrality by actively managing trade-offs rather than passive non-alignment. Hedging rests on foundational assumptions about uncertainty, risk management and strategic ambiguity in an anarchic system.

System Uncertainty

Hedging assumes an uncertain international distribution of power where states doubt a rising power's intentions. States distrust self-restraint by others prompting mixed cooperative-competitive behaviours to hedge against escalation without premature commitment. International relations theorists explain system uncertainty as arising from anarchy, incomplete information, power transitions and indeterminate social structures driving hedging and conflict behaviors. Realists link it with power structures, where great powers initiate disputes amid shifting balances. Robert Jervis highlights misperceptions

amplifying security dilemmas under anarchy-induced fear. Kuik Cheng-Chwee (2024)^v assumes uncertainty over rising power intentions, prompting mixed strategies.

Role of Leadership

In neoclassical realism leadership plays a pivotal role as an intervening variable that filters systemic pressures through leaders' perceptions, domestic constraints and decision-making processes (Götz, 2021)^{vi}. Leaders interpret relative power distributions, threats and opportunities shaping foreign policy responses beyond structural determinism. Leaders' cognitive biases and worldviews mediate anarchy's effects, determining national interests and policy timing. Leadership extracts state power from society via institutions overcoming obstacles like civil-military tensions or public opinion to operationalize strategies. Neoclassical realists highlight leaders mobilizing resources amid threats. India's case exemplifies this in the Indo-Pacific region. India seeks to enhance economic, political, diplomatic and institutional relations through engagement, accommodation, and binding. India also competes through complex, soft and low-intensity balancing.

Modi's Diplomacy for Regional Hegemony

India's pursuit of regional hegemony in the Indian Ocean region has evolved from the Nehru era. Nehru envisioned India as Asia's moral leader via Panchsheel non-interference (Dasgupta, 2016)^{vii}, but pursued hegemony through military interventions and economic aid expecting deference from smaller neighbours. Interests focused on territorial integrity and anti-colonial solidarity, establishing de facto South Asian primacy despite 1962 China defeat exposing vulnerabilities. Interests hardened post-Bangladesh war (1971), fragmenting Pakistan and affirming hegemony via IPKF in Sri Lanka (1987) and Operation Cactus in Maldives (1988) (Brewster, 2014)^{viii}. Economic reforms in 1991 broadened interests to Indo-Pacific influence with Look East Policy hedging China through ASEAN ties.

Modi's Neighbourhood Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region have reshaped India's foreign policy since 2014, emphasizing maritime security, strategic partnerships, and a rule-based order to address China's assertive expansion. This approach builds on doctrines like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), positioning India as a key player in countering Beijing's influence through deepened ties with Quad partners United States, Japan, and Australia while pursuing multi-alignment. These efforts reflect India's ambition to assert regional leadership amid rising Sino-Indian tensions, particularly along the Line of Actual Control and in the Indian Ocean. Early Modi visits to Japan, Australia, and ASEAN nations in 2014 signaled a shift toward maritime domain awareness and joint exercises, responding to China's Belt and Road Initiative and South China Sea claims (Singh, 2017)^{ix}. This period marked India's doctrinal innovation, rejecting unilateral Chinese projects while fostering alternatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

Deterrence

Military modernization features blue-water navy expansion, nuclear submarines, and forward bases like Andaman and Nicobar to project power and deter intrusions. In 2025, post-conflict actions against Pakistan included Operation Sindoor strikes, trade sanctions, and Indus Waters Treaty threats, demonstrating coercive deterrence (Ramachandran, 2025)^x. Similar pressures on Bangladesh via water control assert regional primacy. Multi-alignment hedges risks, engaging BRICS/SCO alongside Quad for autonomy while reshaping norms through IPOI on ecology and connectivity. Coercive diplomacy in 2025 economic boycotts on Turkey, diaspora leverage signals aggressive posturing for influence. This positions India as a reformist power, balancing China without full alliance dependence. Modi's necklace of diamonds strategy counters China's string of pearls by establishing a network of strategic ports, bases and partnerships encircling key chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Decoupling

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomacy promotes economic de-risking over full decoupling from China in the Indo-Pacific, using supply chain diversification and alternative corridors to reduce vulnerabilities and enhance regional leverage. Initiatives like Aatmanirbhar Bharat and PLI schemes build domestic manufacturing resilience, attracting investments while fostering partnerships that counter Beijing's dominance. This approach seeks hegemony through economic interdependence on Indian terms, prioritizing strategic autonomy amid persistent trade deficits. Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliance) drives Production-Linked Incentives (PLI) across 14 sectors, including electronics and solar modules, with \$26 billion outlay to cut import reliance from China (Kadaba, Aithal, & Sharma, 2023)^{xi}. Critical minerals policy identifies 30 items like lithium, spurring auctions and private exploration to avoid new dependencies. These measures blend protectionism with competitiveness, evidenced by growing semiconductor MOUs with the US and Japan.

Quad's supply chain pillar and IPEF focus de-risking critical sectors without full decoupling, via information-sharing and resilience frameworks. IMEEC corridor links India-Middle East-Europe, bypassing China, while Minerals Security Partnership

secures resources (Suri, Ghosh, Taneja, Patil, & Mookherjee, 2024)^{xii}. Trilateral deals with Japan-Australia diversify manufacturing, subsidizing shifts from China. MAHASAGAR upgrades SAGAR, integrating economic cooperation, tech-sharing, and concessional financing to outcompete China's BRI in IOR nations like Mauritius and Maldives. FTAs with UAE, Australia, and ongoing EU/GCC talks boost trade diversification, countering China's \$1.1 billion Mauritius trade edge over India's \$554 million (Humphreys, Stokenberga, Dappe, & Hartmann, 2019)^{xiii}. IPOI advances connectivity and ecology, institutionalizing alternatives via BIMSTEC and Colombo Security Conclave. Economic diplomacy widens influence through aid, infrastructure like Mauritius metro, and capacity-building, positioning India as net provider amid US tariffs fostering intra-Asian networks. Despite almost \$100 billion China trade deficit, diversification undermines BRI debt traps, enhancing bargaining power. This pragmatic multi-alignment avoids isolation, aligning with BRICS while leading Indo-Pacific resilience.

Selective Cooperation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's selective cooperation diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific embodies multi-alignment, engaging rivals like China in forums such as BRICS and SCO while deepening ties with Quad partners for strategic gains. This calibrated approach maximizes flexibility, advances Indian priorities like counterterrorism, and hedges against dependencies to bolster regional preeminence. Forum-shopping across overlapping institutions ensures agenda convergence without binding commitments. India pursues strategic autonomy via selective engagement, cooperating with the US and Quad on security while maintaining RIC, BRICS, and SCO dialogues with Russia and China. Modi avoids formal alliances, favoring informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) for lower sovereignty costs and maneuverability. This enables soft balancing against antagonists through economic and institutional measures.

India generates policy overlaps across RIC-BRICS-SCO to advance agendas like counterterrorism, replicating successes such as condemning state-sponsored terrorism from one forum to others (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021)^{xiv}. Despite setbacks in SCO/BRICS, RIC reactivation in 2018 provided a platform for CCIT endorsement and Pakistan-focused language. Selective participation, like joining IPEF but exiting RCEP, filters beneficial platforms aligned with "Make in India." In SCO, India engages China amid disputes, compartmentalizing issues for maritime and economic cooperation while critiquing vetoes on terror listings. Quad and bilateral pacts with Australia-France emphasize clean energy and connectivity via IPOI pillars. BRICS summits allow Global South leadership, cautioning against anti-Western dilution. Selective cooperation enhances India's normative hedging, positioning it as a bridge power in contested spaces like the Indian Ocean Region. By diversifying ties US for tech, Russia for defense, ASEAN for trade India turns pressures into leverage, amplifying influence without isolation. This sustains multipolar advocacy while constraining rivals.

US-India Security Partnership - A Big Move

Prime Minister Narendra Modi views the US-India security partnership as a vital pillar of India's strategic autonomy and Indo-Pacific resilience, transforming it into a comprehensive framework for defense interoperability, technology co-production, and joint deterrence against regional threats like China's assertiveness. Modi and President Trump renewed the 10-year Framework for the US-India Major Defense Partnership in February 2025, extending it through 2035, with focus on co-producing systems like Javelin missiles, Stryker vehicles, and additional P-8I aircraft (Singh, Pande, Smith, Saran, Joshi, & Lohman, 2018)^{xv}. This builds on earlier milestones such as BECA geospatial sharing and initiatives like COMPACT for accelerating military tech transfer.

Diplomatic Style Agglomeration

Modi hedges uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific through a multi-aligned strategy that blends selective balancing against China, economic engagement with multiple powers and multilateral diplomacy avoiding binding alliances. This approach manages risks from US-China rivalry, border tensions and shifting power dynamics while upholding strategic autonomy. Jaishankar, the stalwart of "multi alignment" has given the epitome of hedging in his book *The Indian Way* (2020)^{xvi} "This is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play. India's goal should be to move closer towards the strategic sweet spot." this statement heralds that India will not be embarked on the pattern of enmity in the Indo-Pacific region. New-Delhi reckons animosity with China is counterproductive for Indian priorities in the region. Likewise, The Chinese helms also believe in amity instead of enmity. President Xi Jinping statement in the 2025 SCO summit at Tianjin sparked cordial anticipation for shared growth and cooperation between China and India in the region. President Xi uttered that "China and India are development partners, not rivals. Our differences should not turn into disputes, and our 2.8 billion people are the primary force for a multipolar Asia (Holslag, 2010)^{xvii}."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi knows the art of hedging in the era of Trump protectionism. Reopening of direct flights and ease in tech visa for Chinese in 2025 are immensely calculated moves of Modi to fix the supply chain gap. This move unfolds that Modi conceded shutting out global power China is enormously unrealistic and damaging. This is explicit instance of India's hedging and balancing relations with great powers to protect and maximize its economic strength while upholding sovereignty.

Modi diplomacy has entered into the most complex phase of hedging. This hedging is based on security with the US and supply chain with China. In 2025, the bilateral trade between India and China hit the record figure \$155.6 billion, 12 percent surge than previous year (Shukla & Jain, 2007)^{xviii}. On the other side, President Trump initially levied 50 percent tariffs on India, but Modi cherished a massive diplomatic triumph on February 2, 2026, when he matured a trade deal with President Trump to reduce the tariff on India from 50 percent to 18 percent (Athukorala, 2020)^{xix}.

Besides, New Delhi and Washington have signed a historic 10 years Defense Cooperation framework which is the essence of Prime Minister Modi hedging strategy. This Defense Cooperation will transfer hi-tech technology including jets engines, drones technology, anti-tank missiles, and Intelligence sharing. This unfolds Modi's strategic hedging strategy to deter and balance China military might in the Indo-Pacific region. In the Indo-Pacific, India seeks to maximize its security and economic interests. Simultaneously, India is invigorating its security in the region backed by the US which reflects in QUAD and Necklace of Diamond while upholding diplomatic and economic relations with China to evade zero-sum clash. Along with this, India is the core member of SCO and BRICS. Despite boarder deadly clashes with China in 2020 at Golwan, India's presence in these international forums which are Chinese led provides a direct access to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to engage President Xi and President Putin. Additionally, India is using BRICS for its financial autonomy. India is forecasting to sign infrastructural development projects with the BRICS bank to counterweight the World Bank. New Delhi firmly believes on multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific region and cladding itself as counterweight to Beijing's hegemony in the region. Shinzo Abe Former Prime Minister of Japan unfolds the Indian role in the Indo-Pacific in these words "A Broader Asia is taking shape. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity (Katagiri, 2020)^{xx}." India has the power and the responsibility to ensure this. In this regards, India has leveling ground for new maritime vision. Narendra Modi has launched Necklace of diamond to counterbalance String of Pearls, SAGAR, aiming Security and growth for all in the immediate neighbour, and its contemporary version MAHASAGAR has explicated the strategic intent of New Delhi, stretching from East Africa to Pacific region.

Besides, India vows to operationalize new strategically momentous naval base INS Versha on the eastern seaboard, architected to dock 12 nuclear submarines. INS Versha base will be projected as strategic mirror of Chines Longpo base and it will counter the Chinese belligerent priorities in the region against India. Along with this, India has currently developed a 3000 meter long runway in Agalega Island, Mauritius to project its power in Southern Indian Ocean. Moreover, India has managed to access Sabang deep Sea Port in Indonesia, located at the door sills of Strait of Malacca which is one of the paramount critical chock points in the region. Sabang Sea Port has invigorated the Indian Navy capacity and capability to chock China's most important sea route. The discussion unfolds that India is strategically hedging between China and the US and maximizing its security, economy and hegemony in the region while upholding its sovereignty.

Modi's Diplomatic Styles

Hug Diplomacy

One of the most distinctive features of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic repertoire has been his use of what commentators have termed hug diplomacy. This style, which departs from conventional diplomatic protocol, involves Modi physically embracing world leaders in public settings (Chaulia, 2016)^{xxi}. Far from being a mere gesture of warmth, these embraces have been carefully deployed as instruments of soft power, signaling trust, personal rapport, and India's willingness to engage in a more humanized form of international relations. Modi's hugs with leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French President Emmanuel Macron, and former US President Donald Trump exemplify this approach, projecting India's leader as approachable, confident, and invested in personal chemistry as a complement to formal negotiations.

The symbolism of hug diplomacy lies in its ability to transcend the rigidity of traditional statecraft. In a global environment often dominated by scripted handshakes and choreographed photo opportunities, Modi's embrace conveys spontaneity and sincerity. For instance, his hug with Trump during the latter's visit to India was widely interpreted as a gesture of solidarity, reinforcing the narrative of a strong US-India partnership. Similarly, his embrace of Macron was seen as a reaffirmation of India's deepening ties with France in areas such as defense cooperation and climate diplomacy. These moments, amplified by media coverage, serve to humanize international relations and create a perception of trust that can facilitate smoother negotiations behind closed doors.

Yet, Modi's hug diplomacy is not indiscriminate. The conspicuous absence of such gestures with Chinese President Xi Jinping underscores the selective and strategic nature of this practice. While Modi has met Xi on multiple occasions, including informal summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram, he has refrained from embracing him. This omission is itself a diplomatic signal, reflecting the underlying tensions in Sino-Indian relations, particularly over border disputes and strategic competition in the

Indo-Pacific. By withholding the embrace, Modi communicates caution and distance, thereby using the absence of a gesture as a form of symbolic statecraft.

From an analytical perspective, hug diplomacy can be understood as part of Modi's broader effort to blend hard and soft power. On one hand, India continues to pursue military modernization, strategic partnerships, and assertive positions in multilateral forums. On the other, Modi's personalized diplomacy seeks to cultivate goodwill and trust, projecting India as a country that values relationships as much as strategic interests. This duality reflects India's aspiration to be seen not only as a rising power but also as a responsible and approachable actor in global politics. Examples abound of how hug diplomacy has complemented substantive outcomes. Modi's embrace of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his historic visit to Israel in 2017 symbolized a new chapter in India-Israel relations, paving the way for deeper cooperation in defense, agriculture, and technology (Kumaraswamy, 2023)^{xxii}. His hug with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reinforced the personal bond underpinning the India-Japan strategic partnership, particularly in the context of shared concerns about China's rise. In each case, the gesture was not an isolated act but part of a broader narrative of trust-building and partnership.

In conclusion, Modi's hug diplomacy illustrates how non-verbal communication can be harnessed as a tool of foreign policy. By selectively embracing certain leaders while withholding the gesture from others, Modi has crafted a symbolic language of trust, solidarity, and caution. This style reflects his broader diplomatic approach marked by personalization, symbolism, and the blending of soft power with strategic calculation. In the contemporary era of global politics, where optics and narratives carry as much weight as formal agreements, Modi's hug diplomacy stands out as a distinctive and deliberate instrument of India's international engagement.

Tianjin Reset

The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin in August 2025 marked a significant recalibration in Sino-Indian relations (Bhagat, 2025)^{xxiii}. After years of heightened hostility following border clashes and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, the encounter symbolized a shift from stern antagonism to cautious normalization. Modi's diplomatic posture, which had previously emphasized deterrence and firmness, evolved into a more calculated approach that sought to balance confrontation with cooperation. This transformation was not a wholesale reconciliation but rather a pragmatic reset, acknowledging the realities of unresolved disputes while opening space for dialogue in less contentious domains.

The Tianjin meeting produced what analysts have described as a "dual-track" framework (Stewart, 2015)^{xxiv}. Both leaders signaled that while territorial disputes along the Line of Actual Control would remain unresolved for the foreseeable future, economic cooperation could proceed in parallel. This duality reflects Modi's broader diplomatic style marked by hedging and multi-alignment where India seeks to safeguard its sovereignty while simultaneously leveraging opportunities for trade, investment, and technological collaboration. By compartmentalizing contentious issues from areas of potential convergence, Modi demonstrated a willingness to engage China pragmatically without compromising India's core national interests.

Examples of this dual-track approach include discussions on expanding bilateral trade, enhancing cooperation in renewable energy, and exploring joint initiatives within the SCO framework. At the same time, Modi maintained India's firm stance on border integrity, refusing to dilute security concerns in exchange for economic concessions. This balancing act underscores his ability to blend realism with pragmatism: deterrence remains central to India's strategic calculus, but selective cooperation is pursued to prevent relations from spiraling into outright confrontation.

The Tianjin reset also illustrates Modi's humanized diplomatic style. By meeting Xi in person and signaling openness to dialogue, Modi projected an image of confidence and maturity, framing India as a responsible actor willing to manage differences constructively. Yet, the absence of symbolic gestures such as his trademark "hug diplomacy" highlighted the limits of trust in the Sino-Indian relationship. The calculated restraint conveyed caution, reminding both domestic and international audiences that normalization does not equate to reconciliation. In academic terms, the Tianjin reset can be interpreted as a case of strategic hedging within a multipolar order. Modi's diplomacy sought to reduce tensions without conceding sovereignty, while simultaneously preserving India's ability to deepen ties with other partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quad. The reset thus reflects India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy: compartmentalize disputes, pursue functional cooperation, and maintain strategic autonomy. Ultimately, the Tianjin meeting was less about resolving differences than about managing them, embodying Modi's distinctive diplomatic style pragmatic, symbolic, and carefully calibrated to balance hostility with cautious engagement.

Balancing Diplomacy/Western Quad (I2U2)

India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has increasingly emphasized multi-alignment and pragmatic coalition-building, exemplified by the formation of the I2U2 grouping in 2021. Often described as a "Western Quad," the I2U2

brings together India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US (Fulton, 2023)^{xxv}. The nomenclature itself “I2” for India and Israel, “U2” for the UAE and the United States reflects the deliberate attempt to craft a compact yet strategically significant coalition. Initially, the grouping focused on non-traditional security domains such as energy, water, space, transportation, and food security, thereby signaling a willingness to cooperate on developmental and technological priorities rather than purely military concerns. This orientation allowed the I2U2 to present itself as a pragmatic, solutions-driven partnership, distinct from the Indo-Pacific Quad that is more overtly security-focused.

Modi's role in shaping the I2U2 was not merely institutional but deeply strategic. He recognized that India's participation in this grouping could serve multiple purposes: diversifying India's partnerships beyond its traditional alignments, embedding India within a US-led framework without compromising strategic autonomy, and symbolically breaking the monopoly of the Islamic bloc that historically aligned with Pakistan. By engaging the UAE a key member of the Gulf Cooperation Council India sought to demonstrate that Muslim-majority states could collaborate with New Delhi on shared economic and technological priorities, thereby diluting Pakistan's claim to exclusive solidarity within the Islamic world. Modi's diplomacy here was both symbolic and substantive, projecting India as a bridge between diverse civilizational and religious identities.

The triangularity Modi envisioned between the Hindus of India, the Jews of Israel, and the Muslims of the UAE was not merely rhetorical. It was operationalized through joint projects in renewable energy, food corridors, and technological innovation. For example, the I2U2 countries explored initiatives such as hybrid renewable energy parks in Gujarat, food security projects in India and the Middle East, and collaborative ventures in space technology. These projects underscored Modi's emphasis on functional diplomacy, where partnerships are justified not only by strategic convergence but also by tangible developmental outcomes (Ganguly, Chauthaiwale, & Sinha, 2016)^{xxvi}. In this sense, the I2U2 became a laboratory for India's broader vision of issue-based coalitions that transcend ideological divides. At the same time, Modi's balancing diplomacy ensured that India's participation in I2U2 did not undermine its other partnerships. While deepening ties with Israel and the United States, India continued to maintain strong relations with Iran and Russia, thereby signaling that its engagement in one bloc would not preclude cooperation with others. This de-hyphenated approach allowed India to avoid being boxed into rigid geopolitical categories, while still reaping the benefits of closer alignment with Western and Middle Eastern partners. Modi's foreign policy style marked by bold symbolism, pragmatic coalition-building, and emphasis on strategic autonomy was clearly visible in the way India positioned itself within the I2U2 framework.

In broader perspective, the I2U2 illustrates Modi's attempt to redefine India's role in global governance. By participating in a grouping that spans South Asia, the Middle East, and the West, India projected itself as a connector of regions and cultures. The initiative also reinforced India's image as a rising power capable of shaping new minilateral platforms, rather than merely joining existing ones. Modi's balancing diplomacy thus combined civilizational symbolism with pragmatic policy, enabling India to simultaneously strengthen ties with diverse partners, weaken Pakistan's diplomatic leverage in the Islamic bloc, and advance developmental priorities through innovative coalitions. In this way, the Western Quad became a microcosm of Modi's larger foreign policy vision: multi-aligned, strategically autonomous, and oriented toward both power and prosperity.

De-hyphenated Diplomacy

One of the defining features of India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been the pursuit of what scholars and practitioners term de-hyphenated diplomacy (Ashwarya, 2023)^{xxvii}. This approach signifies a deliberate departure from the earlier tendency to view India's bilateral relations through the prism of third-party linkages or rivalries. In practice, it means that New Delhi seeks to engage each country on its own merits, without allowing its ties with one state to be constrained or dictated by its relations with another. Modi's government has consistently emphasized that India's partnerships should be assessed independently, reflecting both pragmatic interests and strategic autonomy.

The de-hyphenation strategy is particularly evident in India's simultaneous cultivation of ties with countries that share adversarial relations among themselves. For instance, India has deepened defense and technological cooperation with the United States while also maintaining robust energy and strategic engagement with Russia. Similarly, New Delhi has expanded economic and security ties with Israel, even as it continues to support the Palestinian cause and strengthen relations with Arab states. This balancing act underscores India's desire to move beyond Cold War era binaries and to project itself as a confident actor capable of managing multiple, sometimes contradictory, partnerships. From an analytical standpoint, Modi's de-hyphenated diplomacy reflects a broader recalibration of India's foreign policy identity. It signals a shift from reactive alignment to proactive diversification, where India positions itself as a “bridging power” in global politics. By refusing to be boxed into rigid geopolitical categories, India enhances its bargaining leverage and demonstrates resilience in navigating complex international environments. The approach also resonates with India's long-standing emphasis on strategic autonomy, but with a contemporary twist anchored in multi-alignment rather than non-alignment. In essence, de-hyphenated diplomacy under Modi illustrates India's effort to craft a foreign policy that is simultaneously principled and pragmatic. It allows New Delhi to pursue convergences without being hostage to divergences, thereby reinforcing its image as a rising power that can

engage diverse actors on equal terms. This diplomatic posture not only broadens India's strategic options but also reflects its ambition to play a more assertive role in shaping regional and global governance structures.

Missile Diplomacy: The BrahMos Sale (2024–2026)

The period between 2024 and 2026 witnessed a significant evolution in India's defense diplomacy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, particularly through the internationalization of the BrahMos missile system (Rossiter & Cannon, 2019)^{xxviii}. The BrahMos, a supersonic cruise missile jointly developed by India and Russia, became not merely a weapon system but a diplomatic instrument, symbolizing India's aspirations to consolidate its position as a credible security provider in Asia and beyond. Modi's government framed the export of BrahMos as part of a broader strategic narrative one that linked technological prowess with geopolitical influence, thereby embedding missile diplomacy within India's foreign policy toolkit.

At the core of this initiative was the recognition that arms transfers are not only commercial transactions but also vehicles of strategic alignment. By offering BrahMos to Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines, India sought to reinforce regional deterrence against coercive behavior in contested maritime zones, while simultaneously signaling its willingness to shoulder greater responsibility in Indo-Pacific security architectures. The sale thus functioned as a dual-purpose instrument: strengthening bilateral defense ties and projecting India's image as a reliable partner in balancing China's assertiveness. Modi's missile diplomacy, therefore, blurred the line between defense industrial policy and geopolitical signaling.

Equally important was the domestic dimension of the BrahMos export. The Modi government emphasized the sale as evidence of India's transition from a major arms importer to an emerging exporter, aligning with the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) vision. In this sense, missile diplomacy was not only about external signaling but also about internal legitimization demonstrating to domestic audiences that India's defense modernization could yield tangible strategic and economic dividends. The BrahMos sale became a narrative of national pride, linking technological innovation with India's rise as a global actor.

From an analytical perspective, the BrahMos diplomacy of 2024–2026 illustrates the interplay of strategic interoperability and political signaling. On one hand, it deepened India's defense partnerships with states wary of China's maritime expansion. On the other, it showcased India's ability to leverage high-technology exports as a means of embedding itself within regional security architectures. Modi's missile diplomacy thus represents a case study in how middle powers employ defense technology not merely for deterrence but as a currency of influence in international relations (Ganguly, 2017)^{xxix}. It underscores the transformation of India's foreign policy posture from reactive balancing to proactive shaping of regional security environments through the calibrated use of military-industrial instruments.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper has examined Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific as a strategic bid for regional predominance, with particular attention to counterbalancing China's expanding influence. What emerges from this analysis is a portrait of a leader whose diplomatic style is both pragmatic and deeply personalized, blending realist calculations with symbolic gestures and coalition-building. Modi's diplomacy reframes the Indo-Pacific as a multipolar arena, where India asserts its agency through hedging strategies, multi-alignment, and functional cooperation, while simultaneously humanizing statecraft through personal rapport and civilizational symbolism. Modi's diplomatic style is distinguished by its emphasis on personalization. His "hug diplomacy" has become emblematic of his approach, signaling warmth, trust, and confidence in bilateral relations. These gestures are not random acts of friendliness but deliberate instruments of soft power, designed to reduce psychological distance and project India's leader as approachable and invested in personal chemistry. The selective nature of these gestures embracing leaders such as Trump, Macron, and Putin, while withholding the same from Xi Jinping illustrates the strategic calculation embedded in symbolic acts. Modi's personalization of diplomacy thus serves as a subtle yet powerful tool of statecraft, complementing formal negotiations with humanized gestures that resonate both domestically and internationally.

Another defining feature of Modi's diplomacy is the recalibration of India's principle of strategic autonomy. Rather than adhering to rigid non-alignment, Modi has pursued a de-hyphenated approach, engaging each country on its own merits without allowing bilateral ties to be constrained by third-party rivalries. This is evident in India's ability to deepen defense cooperation with the US and Israel while simultaneously maintaining robust energy and strategic ties with Russia and the Arab world. Such multi-alignment enhances India's bargaining leverage, allowing it to pursue convergences without being hostage to divergences. In theoretical terms, this reflects a realist hedging strategy balancing deterrence and cooperation to maximize autonomy in a multipolar environment. Modi's foreign policy also demonstrates a keen interest in coalition-building through minilateral platforms. The Indo-Pacific Quad and the Western Quad (I2U2) illustrate India's willingness to participate in issue-based groupings that transcend traditional alliances. In the case of I2U2, Modi envisioned a triangularity between Hindus, Jews, and Muslims, symbolically breaking the monopoly of the Islamic bloc that historically aligned with Pakistan. By focusing

on functional areas such as food security, renewable energy, and technology, Modi projected India as a pragmatic partner capable of delivering tangible developmental outcomes. This functional diplomacy complements India's strategic ambitions, reinforcing its image as both a rising power and a responsible actor.

The findings of this research underscore Modi's nuanced hedging approach in the Indo-Pacific. Faced with China's expanding influence and Belt and Road encroachments, Modi has combined deterrence, economic decoupling, and selective cooperation to enhance India's leverage. Maritime domain awareness initiatives, defense modernization, and closer Quad partnerships serve as instruments of deterrence, while economic diversification and regional connectivity projects mitigate dependence on China. At the same time, selective cooperation in multilateral forums allows India to avoid outright confrontation, preserving space for dialogue. This hedging strategy reflects a realist calculation balancing risks of abandonment and entrapment while safeguarding national interests such as territorial integrity and economic security.

Beyond strategic calculations, Modi's diplomacy is marked by a humanized style that resonates with both domestic and international audiences. His emphasis on civilizational symbolism, personal rapport, and developmental cooperation makes diplomacy more relatable and accessible. Modi's ability to blend hard power with soft power military modernization with cultural outreach, strategic partnerships with personal gestures reflects a holistic vision of international engagement. This humanization reinforces national pride at home while appealing to international partners who value trust and personal chemistry in leadership.

Modi's diplomatic style has significant implications for India's global role. By projecting confidence, autonomy, and pragmatism, India has positioned itself as a connector of regions and cultures, capable of bridging divides between diverse actors. Modi's emphasis on multi-alignment allows India to navigate complex geopolitical environments without being boxed into rigid categories. His symbolic gestures and coalition-building initiatives enhance India's visibility and credibility, while his functional diplomacy ensures that partnerships yield tangible outcomes. Collectively, these elements contribute to India's aspiration to play a more assertive role in shaping regional and global governance structures. While Modi's diplomatic style has yielded notable successes, it also invites critical reflection. The personalization of diplomacy, while effective in building rapport, risks over-reliance on individual charisma at the expense of institutional continuity. The pursuit of de-hyphenation, though strategically advantageous, requires careful management to avoid contradictions or perceptions of opportunism. Similarly, coalition-building through minilateral platforms must be balanced with commitments to multilateralism, ensuring that India's global posture remains inclusive and credible. These challenges underscore the need for India to institutionalize the gains of Modi's diplomacy, embedding them within a broader foreign policy framework that can endure beyond individual leadership.

In conclusion, Modi's diplomatic style represents a distinctive fusion of symbolism, pragmatism, and autonomy. His embrace of leaders, his refusal to be constrained by traditional binaries, and his emphasis on functional cooperation all reflect a deliberate effort to craft a foreign policy that is both humanized and strategic. Modi's diplomacy has projected India as a confident, approachable, and autonomous actor, capable of engaging diverse partners on equal terms. It has reframed the Indo-Pacific as a multipolar arena, prioritizing national interests over outright confrontation, and positioning India as a rising power that values relationships as much as interests. Ultimately, Modi's diplomatic style illustrates how leadership can shape the texture of international relations, blending personal charisma with national strategy to advance a country's global role.

End Notes

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