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India's Diplomatic Position To US-Iran Conflict: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The US-Iran conflict, particularly the 2026 Hormuz War and its aftermath, has presented one of the most significant foreign policy tests for India in the post-Cold War era. This paper critically examines India's diplomatic position toward the US-Iran conflict, analyzing the tension between New Delhi's professed commitment to strategic autonomy and its growing alignment with the United States and Israel. Through a qualitative analysis of official statements, diplomatic actions, scholarly literature, and policy reports, this research argues that India's response to the conflict reveals a fundamental contradiction: while publicly maintaining a discourse of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy, India's actual diplomatic posture has demonstrated a discernible tilt toward the US-Israel axis, with significant costs for its credibility, regional influence, and long-term strategic interests. The paper develops a conceptual framework—the Strategic Autonomy-Actual Alignment Paradox—to explain this disconnect and assesses its implications for India's foreign policy in an increasingly polarized world order.

Keywords: India, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, US-Iran conflict, West Asia diplomacy, foreign policy

1. Introduction

The eruption of the US-Iran confrontation in late February 2026, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and followed by Tehran's missile retaliation against Gulf infrastructure, pushed the Middle East into a new phase of instability. For India, whose stakes in the region are vast—ranging from heavy energy dependence to a large expatriate community and expanding diplomatic partnerships—this turbulence inevitably tested the resilience and coherence of its foreign policy.

India's foreign policy has long celebrated the principle of strategic autonomy—the ability to pursue national interests without becoming dependent on any single power bloc. This principle, evolving from the Cold War policy of non-alignment to today's "multi-alignment," has been presented as the foundation of India's approach to great power politics. However, the US-Iran conflict exposed the limits of this framework, forcing New Delhi to confront the tension between its strategic autonomy—which enabled engagement with Washington's adversaries—and its growing commitment to the Indo-Pacific partnership with the United States.

This paper seeks to critically examine India's diplomatic position toward the US-Iran conflict, analyzing the gap between rhetoric and practice, the costs of strategic silence, and the implications for India's international standing. The central argument is that India's response to the conflict reveals a fundamental paradox: while publicly maintaining a discourse of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, New Delhi's

actual diplomatic posture has demonstrated a discernible tilt toward the US-Israel axis, with significant consequences for its credibility, regional influence, and long-term strategic interests.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundations: Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment

The concept of strategic autonomy has been central to Indian foreign policy discourse since independence. Scholars have traced its evolution from Jawaharlal Nehru's non-alignment during the Cold War to the current framework of "multi-alignment" under the Modi government. As Harsh V. Pant notes, India has pursued a strategy best described as "calibrated multi-alignment"—rather than locking itself into rigid blocs, New Delhi has cultivated parallel relationships with Iran, the Gulf monarchies, Israel, and the US.

The literature on strategic autonomy emphasizes its function as both a principle and a practice. In principle, it is about preserving the ability to exercise independent foreign policy, unrestrained by external pressure. However, in practice, it can manifest as strategic ambiguity, where the absence of clear signalling creates uncertainty about a state's position. This ambiguity has allowed India flexibility in maintaining ties across rival camps, but it is in times of conflict that the limits of such flexibility are tested.

2.2 India's West Asia Balancing Act

Scholars have extensively documented India's diplomatic balancing in West Asia. Before the 2026 conflict broke out, Indian diplomacy in the Middle East was viewed as a successful balancing act between several countries that are at odds with each other. India maintained strong partnerships with Israel in defence technology, agriculture, and innovation, while sustaining deep economic and energy ties with the Arab world and Iran.

The literature identifies three key pillars of India's West Asia policy: energy security (with India importing approximately 88 percent of its crude oil), the welfare of the Indian diaspora (nearly 10 million Indians live and work across West Asia), and strategic connectivity projects such as the Chabahar port. However, scholars have noted that these interests increasingly pull New Delhi in opposing directions, making the balancing act progressively difficult to sustain.

2.3 The Chabahar Port as a Case Study

The Chabahar port project has emerged as a critical case study in the literature on India's Iran policy. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast, the port gives New Delhi a route to Eurasian markets that bypasses Pakistan. India signed a 10-year agreement with Iran in May 2024 to operate the Shahid Beheshti terminal. However, the project has been repeatedly complicated by US sanctions, with the Trump administration revoking the sanctions waiver in September 2025 before granting a conditional extension until April 2026.

Analysts have characterized Chabahar as a test case for India's sanctions diplomacy, with New Delhi seeking to separate the port from the broader sanctions dispute by arguing that it serves regional connectivity, trade diversification, and humanitarian access. As one expert noted, "Chabahar Port is India's only viable route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan. An Indian exit would almost certainly leave a vacuum for China to fill".

2.4 The 2026 Iran War: Scholarly Assessments

The 2026 Iran War has generated substantial scholarly commentary on India's diplomatic performance. Analysts have noted that India's response was measured and deliberate: urging restraint from all sides, safeguarding its economic interests, and maintaining open channels with every actor involved. However, critics have characterized this as "strategic silence," arguing that India avoided taking a clear position on the hostilities between Iran and the US and Israel.

The literature reveals competing interpretations of India's stance. Some scholars view it as a pragmatic application of strategic autonomy—a calculated, measured quietude that reflects an active realisation of India's "calibrated multi-alignment" strategy. Others see it as a diplomatic failure, arguing that a country of India's size and energy dependence cannot afford to place all its geopolitical bets on one side of a

regional divide. The assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader and India's initial reluctance to sign condolence books at Iranian embassies have been cited as particularly telling examples of New Delhi's alignment with the US-Israel axis.

2.5 The Wire (2026) provides a critical examination of India's diplomatic marginalization during the US-Iran conflict, contrasting New Delhi's inability to leverage its relationships with Islamabad's successful mediation. The analysis argues that India's strategy of multi-alignment, designed to prevent dependence on any single power, devolved into "selective alignment" with the US-Israel axis. It traces the conceptual evolution from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, citing Ian Hall's work on building multiple partnerships without binding alliances. The piece highlights how Hindu nationalist ideas and ideological affinity with Israeli nationalism have increasingly shaped India's foreign policy, making the Israel relationship "highly public, personalised and politically symbolic." This source is valuable for understanding the gap between India's professed multi-alignment and its actual diplomatic practice.

2.6 Gupta (2026) examines the architecture of US economic warfare against Iran and its cascading geopolitical consequences for West Asia. Tracing the evolution of US-Iran hostility from the 1979 Revolution through the maximum pressure campaigns, the analysis argues that while US sanctions have constrained Iran's strategic capacity, they have created a volatile environment with direct consequences for India's security and connectivity interests. It specifically addresses how India's strategic autonomy has been tested by the Chabahar dilemma, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) calculus, and the challenge of balancing ties with Washington against long-standing ties with Tehran. The conclusion that India must pursue "calibrated diplomatic engagement" is particularly relevant to understanding India's policy constraints.

2.7 Takshashila Institution (2026) offers a comprehensive examination of India's response through a three-axis framework: diaspora welfare, energy security, and external engagements. The paper argues that these three imperatives "pulled India in structurally contradictory directions." It provides crucial contextual data: approximately 9-10 million Indian nationals reside in West Asia generating nearly 38% of total global remittance inflows; over 50% of crude oil imports and roughly 60% of natural gas imports come from the region; and about 90% of LPG imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. The brief also documents India's operational response, including the evacuation of over 52,000 Indians in the first week of March 2026. This source is essential for understanding the structural constraints—energy dependence, diaspora welfare, and diplomatic balancing—that shaped India's policy choices.

2.8 The Peninsula (2026) decodes the rationale behind India's diplomatic restraint, arguing that it represents not paralysis but "a calculated, measured quietude—an active realisation of its 'calibrated multi-alignment' strategy." It examines India's "juggling act" between conflicting diplomatic realities: Gulf alignment through defence and energy pacts with the UAE, Tehran's direct engagement with New Delhi, and simultaneous negotiation for US strategic partnership and Israeli technology. The analysis highlights the economic vulnerabilities created by the conflict, noting that retaliatory disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz forced India to draw down its national petroleum inventories by 15%. It also documents the domestic impact, including panic buying of cooking gas, vehicle fuels, and groceries. This source is valuable for understanding both the diplomatic rationale and the domestic economic costs of India's strategic silence.

2.9 Bhardwaj (2026) argues that India's strategic options during the Iran conflict remained "severely constrained" despite the war's expansion to other Gulf states. It challenges the misperception that India and Iran enjoy close ties, noting that New Delhi has "deliberately distanced itself" from Tehran in recent years under US pressure. The analysis highlights how India's ideological, material, and geopolitical interests disincentivise it from leaning towards Iran. Materially, India has little to lose in Iran as the two economies have "dramatically decoupled" under Washington's sanctions, with energy imports from Iran practically zero since 2019 and only 4,000 Indian nationals now residing there. The paper documents India's muted response to Khamenei's assassination and argues that India's "reticence was effectively to the advantage of the US-Israel side." This source provides crucial context on the decoupling of India-Iran economic ties.

2.10 Trembeczki (2026) examines Prime Minister Modi's February 2026 visit to Israel, which formalized a strategic convergence that has been building over the past decade. The visit elevated the bilateral relationship to a "Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation & Prosperity," covering military technology, arms industry, cybersecurity, and space activities. The analysis argues that within days of the visit, the US-Israeli war on Iran put India's multi-aligned posture to the test. It notes that India still seeks to balance ties with all three poles of the Middle Eastern geopolitical conundrum—Israel, the Gulf Arab monarchies, and Iran—but "the war has underlined the limits of this balancing act." The piece also warns of a "reputational price for India's image as the self-declared leader of the Global South." This source is essential for understanding the symbolic and strategic significance of India's deepening Israel relationship.

2.11 Gaps in the Literature

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into India's West Asia policy and its response to the Iran conflict, several gaps remain. First, there is limited systematic analysis of the gap between India's stated commitment to strategic autonomy and its actual diplomatic behaviour during the conflict. Second, the literature tends to treat India's response as either a success or a failure, without adequately examining the structural constraints that shape New Delhi's choices. Third, there is insufficient attention to the domestic political and economic factors that influenced India's diplomatic posture. This paper aims to address these gaps through a critical analysis that examines both the rhetoric and the reality of India's diplomatic position.

3. Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. **Primary Research Question:** How did India's diplomatic position toward the US-Iran conflict reflect the tension between its stated commitment to strategic autonomy and its actual alignment with the United States and Israel?
2. **Sub-Question 1:** What were the key factors—strategic, economic, and domestic—that shaped India's diplomatic response to the US-Iran conflict?
3. **Sub-Question 2:** What were the costs and consequences of India's diplomatic posture for its credibility, regional influence, and long-term strategic interests?
4. **Sub-Question 3:** To what extent did India's "multi-alignment" framework prove sustainable during the crisis, and what lessons can be drawn for India's future foreign policy?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing a case study approach to analyze India's diplomatic position toward the US-Iran conflict. The case study method is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth, contextualized examination of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting. The US-Iran conflict of 2026—particularly the period from February to June 2026—serves as the primary case for analysis.

4.2 Data Sources

The research draws on multiple sources of data:

Primary Sources:

- Official statements from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)
- Parliamentary statements by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar
- Diplomatic communications and press releases
- Official government documents, including responses to parliamentary questions

Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly articles and policy reports from research institutions including the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP)
- News analyses from major Indian and international media outlets
- Expert commentaries and opinion pieces by former diplomats and scholars

4.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a triangulation approach, cross-referencing multiple data sources to ensure validity and reliability. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns, themes, and contradictions in India's diplomatic discourse and practice. The research also employs process tracing to examine the sequence of events and decisions that shaped India's response to the conflict.

4.4 Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on publicly available sources, as access to classified diplomatic communications is not possible. Second, the ongoing nature of the conflict and its aftermath means that some consequences may not yet be fully apparent. Third, the analysis is necessarily interpretive, and alternative interpretations of India's diplomatic position are possible.

5. Research Framework

5.1 Conceptual Framework: The Strategic Autonomy-Actual Alignment Paradox

This paper proposes a conceptual framework—the **Strategic Autonomy-Actual Alignment Paradox**—to analyze India's diplomatic position. The framework posits that:

1. **Discourse vs. Practice:** There exists a persistent gap between India's public commitment to strategic autonomy and its actual diplomatic behaviour, particularly during crises involving its major partners.
2. **Structural Constraints:** India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is constrained by structural factors including energy dependence, defence procurement relationships, economic integration with the US, and the geopolitical imperative of countering China.
3. **Crisis-Induced Alignment:** During periods of acute crisis, the structural constraints become more pronounced, leading India to align more closely with the United States despite its rhetorical commitment to strategic autonomy.
4. **Credibility Costs:** This gap between discourse and practice generates credibility costs, as India's partners question its reliability and its claim to independent foreign policy leadership.

5.2 Analytical Dimensions

The framework operationalizes the analysis along four dimensions:

Dimension	Indicators	Sources
Diplomatic Discourse	Official statements, parliamentary speeches, public diplomacy	MEA statements, Jaishankar speeches
Diplomatic Practice	Voting patterns in multilateral forums, bilateral engagements, crisis response	UN votes, diplomatic visits, policy actions
Structural Constraints	Energy dependence, defence ties, economic integration	Trade data, defence agreements, economic statistics
Credibility Outcomes	Partner perceptions, regional influence, strategic costs	Expert assessments, diplomatic reactions

5.3 Theoretical Underpinnings

The framework draws on several theoretical traditions:

- **Neoclassical Realism:** Emphasizing the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic political factors in shaping foreign policy
- **Hedging Theory:** Understanding how states maintain multiple options in an uncertain strategic environment
- **Discourse Analysis:** Examining how language and framing shape and reflect policy choices

6. Analysis

6.1 India's Diplomatic Discourse: Multi-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy

India's official discourse during the US-Iran conflict consistently emphasized its commitment to dialogue, diplomacy, and multi-alignment. In a press conference with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in May 2026, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar laid out five key principles guiding India's approach: "India advocates dialogue and diplomacy to address conflicts. We support safe and unimpeded maritime commerce. We demand scrupulous respect for international law. We are against weaponization of market shares and resources. And we believe in the value of trusted partnerships and resilient supply chains to de-risk the global economy".

Jaishankar emphasized India's unique position as one of the few countries maintaining strong ties simultaneously with the United States, Israel, Iran, and Gulf nations. He described India's approach as "multi-alignment," arguing that a rising India with expanding global interests must increasingly engage multiple power centres simultaneously.

Official statements from the Ministry of External Affairs reflected a consistent pattern: expressions of "deep concern," calls for de-escalation, and emphasis on dialogue and diplomacy. In a March 2026 statement, India urged all sides to "exercise restraint, avoid escalation, and prioritise the safety of civilians," adding that "dialogue and diplomacy should be pursued to de-escalate tensions and address underlying issues".

However, even within this discourse of neutrality, subtle signals suggested a quiet tilt. Jaishankar framed the India-US relationship through the lens of national interest, noting that "the administration has been very forthright in putting forward its foreign policy outlook as America First," and that "where we are concerned, we have a view of India First". This framing, while ostensibly neutral, positioned India's interests as complementary to rather than distinct from America's.

6.2 Diplomatic Practice: The Gap Between Rhetoric and Action

The gap between India's discourse of strategic autonomy and its actual diplomatic behaviour became apparent in several key areas.

Failure to Condemn: The Assassination of Khamenei

The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader in February 2026 exposed the contradictions in India's foreign policy. New Delhi did not strongly condemn the United States and Israel for the killing, even as tensions across West Asia surged. More tellingly, reports indicated that Indian diplomats were initially instructed not to sign condolence books at Iranian embassies—a move widely interpreted as an attempt to avoid offending Israel and the United States. Within days, the government appeared to recognize the diplomatic cost of this hesitation, and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri visited the Iranian Embassy in New Delhi. This episode illustrated how India's strategic silence, while intended to preserve bilateral ties in the short term, created the impression of selective engagement and raised questions about India's loyalty and reliability.

UN Voting Patterns

India's voting behaviour at the United Nations further illuminated its tilt. In March 2026, India rejected Russia's UN ceasefire resolution and supported Bahrain's proposal condemning Iran's counterstrikes on its neighbours. These moves underscored India's prioritization of Indo-Pacific partnerships over its professed commitment to neutrality. As one analyst noted, "India's moves underscored its prioritization of Indo-Pacific partnerships".

The Chabahar Dilemma

India's handling of the Chabahar port project revealed the tension between its Iran engagement and US alignment. While Iran urged India to continue its cooperation in the port despite US sanctions, calling it a "golden gateway" to Central Asia, India's budget for 2026-27 did not allocate any funds for the project. The Ministry of External Affairs stated that the issue was "under discussion" with both Iran and the United States, adding that "the current conflict is also a complicating factor".

This ambiguity created operational uncertainty. The United States had granted a six-month sanctions waiver for Chabahar in October 2025, but the waiver expired in April 2026. As one analysis observed, "any substantial acceleration at Chabahar would require financing, equipment procurement, shipping connectivity and private-sector participation. Each of these areas is vulnerable to sanctions risk". India's inability to provide clarity on the project's future undermined its credibility with Iran.

The Hormuz Crisis

The most dramatic illustration of the limits of US-India strategic convergence came with the deaths of three Indian seafarers in a US military strike near the Strait of Hormuz. New Delhi's reaction was unusually sharp: the Ministry of External Affairs summoned the US Charge d'Affaires and issued a formal diplomatic protest demanding an explanation, accountability, and assurances that similar incidents would not be repeated.

As one analyst observed, "strategic convergence, however significant, does not eliminate divergent interests". The incident demonstrated that "geopolitical alignment in one theatre does not necessarily translate into policy convergence across all regions". The domestic political fallout—with opposition parties criticizing the government's handling of the relationship with Washington—further complicated India's balancing act.

6.3 Structural Constraints: Why India Cannot Fully Exercise Strategic Autonomy

India's inability to fully exercise strategic autonomy during the Iran conflict can be attributed to several structural constraints.

Energy Dependence

India imports close to 88 percent of its crude oil, and any disruption in the Strait of Hormuz—the artery through which a large share of global energy flows—inevitably reverberates through the Indian economy. The sharp reduction in tanker traffic and the rise in crude prices during the conflict threatened to widen India's already substantial energy import bill. With petroleum reserves covering roughly two months of consumption, India's energy vulnerability remained acute.

Defence and Technology Dependence

India's growing defence and technology ties with the United States and Israel created significant constraints. As one analysis noted, "India has grown closer to Israel in defense and technological cooperation, elevating the relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership". This dependence made it difficult for India to openly criticize US or Israeli actions, even when they conflicted with Indian interests.

Economic Integration with the US

The Trump administration's aggressive use of tariffs to challenge India's Russian oil imports and relations with Iran placed stress on India's economic and strategic planning. By December 2025, "New Delhi's acquiescence to Washington's pressure was apparent, notwithstanding its public assertions of strategic autonomy. India curtailed its imports of Russian oil and deepened its engagement with Israel to align with Washington's strategic preferences".

The China Factor

India's overriding strategic concern—countering China's rise—pushed it toward closer alignment with the United States. As one Chinese analyst observed, "India has few viable options because it continues to regard China as its overriding strategic concern". The Quad framework, with the US, Japan, and Australia, became central to India's geoeconomic strategy. The 2020 Galwan clashes with China pressed India toward deeper defence cooperation and economic ties within the Indo-Pacific framework.

6.4 The Costs of Strategic Silence

India's diplomatic posture during the Iran conflict carried significant costs.

Credibility Costs

India's failure to take a clear position on the hostilities created the impression of selective engagement. As one analysis argued, "What is viewed as Realpolitik by New Delhi risks being interpreted elsewhere as opportunism". Perceptions matter, especially in South Asia, where India's response to the war in West Asia is closely observed by its smaller neighbours through the lens of reliability and leadership.

Regional Influence

Pakistan's successful mediation between the US and Iran stood in stark contrast to India's marginalization. "The view from Iran is that India's long-standing relations with US and Israel bore no leverage, while Pakistan managed to name the agreement after its capital". As one commentator noted, "Relations with Israel and US acquired political priority, while relations with Iran were reduced to cautious diplomacy, delayed infrastructure projects and abandoned economic mechanisms".

Economic Costs

The domestic economic impact of the conflict was substantial. Retaliatory disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz forced India to draw down its national petroleum inventories by 15%. Rising domestic fuel prices and supply chain shocks presented risks to broader inflationary pressures. The public interpreted

precautionary measures as signs of impending doom, leading to panic buying of cooking gas, vehicle fuels, and groceries.

Diplomatic Marginalization

Perhaps most significantly, India's diplomatic weight was not deployed in proportion to its interests or its stated ambitions. As one analysis concluded, "the peace deal's most lasting consequence for India's international standing is the confirmation of what the preceding months had already demonstrated: that India's diplomatic weight is not being deployed in proportion to its interests or its stated ambitions". Former External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha criticized India's limited diplomatic role, saying New Delhi missed an opportunity to play the role of a mediator.

6.5 India's Response to the Peace Agreement

The US-Iran peace agreement, announced on June 15 and signed in Geneva on June 19, 2026, ended a 107-day conflict. India welcomed the understanding, expressing hope that it would lead to sustained peace and stability in West Asia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed the agreement, saying the hostilities had taken a heavy toll by disrupting the global economy and claiming lives across several countries. India reiterated that it would stay engaged with partners in West Asia while continuing to back dialogue, diplomacy, safe navigation, and regional stability.

However, even as India expressed relief at the conflict's end, the peace agreement crystallized the strategic and diplomatic costs of a foreign policy that had quietly subordinated Indian sovereignty to the imperatives of the US-Israel axis. As one analysis observed, "the relief the deal provides is partial and temporary. The reckoning it demands is structural and overdue".

7. Discussion

7.1 The Strategic Autonomy-Actual Alignment Paradox

The analysis confirms the central argument of this paper: India's response to the US-Iran conflict reveals a fundamental paradox between its discourse of strategic autonomy and its actual diplomatic behaviour. While India publicly maintained a posture of neutrality and multi-alignment, its actions—including its failure to condemn the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, its UN voting patterns, its handling of the Chabahar project, and its overall diplomatic marginalization—demonstrated a discernible tilt toward the US-Israel axis.

This paradox can be explained by the structural constraints identified in the analysis: India's energy dependence, defence and technology ties with the US and Israel, economic integration with Washington, and the geopolitical imperative of countering China. These constraints made it difficult for India to exercise genuine strategic autonomy during the crisis, even as it continued to invoke the concept rhetorically.

7.2 The Limits of Multi-Alignment

The Iran conflict exposed the limits of India's multi-alignment framework. While multi-alignment works well during peacetime, allowing India to maximize its options and cultivate ties with both Israel and Iran, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain during acute crises when alignments harden.

As one analysis noted, "India's balanced diplomacy in West Asia" has involved "elevating its strategic partnership with Israel" while maintaining ties with Iran. However, when these relationships come into direct conflict, it is "extraordinarily difficult to maintain tight strategic autonomy". The crisis demonstrated that "India today is far more integrated into global energy markets, more deeply tied to Israel in defense and technology, and more economically intertwined with the Gulf. Its choices, therefore, have greater consequences".

7.3 Implications for India's Foreign Policy

The findings of this research have several implications for India's foreign policy.

The Need for Strategic Clarity

India's strategic ambiguity, while allowing short-term flexibility, carries long-term credibility costs. As one analysis argued, "silence in diplomacy is rarely neutral". India's partners—both in the US-Israel axis and in Iran—may question its reliability if it continues to avoid taking clear positions during crises.

The Challenge of Balancing

The Iran conflict demonstrated that balancing between rival powers becomes increasingly difficult as India's relationships with those powers deepen. India's growing integration with the US and Israel—in defence, technology, and economics—makes it harder to maintain an independent posture toward Iran. As one observer noted, "India will find it challenging to maintain a balance between our ties with Israel, Iran, the GCC countries, and the US, with each of whom we have compelling interests".

The Cost of Alignment

India's tilt toward the US-Israel axis during the Iran conflict came at a cost: damaged relations with Iran, reduced credibility in the region, and missed opportunities for diplomatic leadership. As one analysis concluded, "To lose Iran was neither India's active choice nor truly a fait accompli; the US coerced and co-opted India into doing so over the years".

The Opportunity of Multi-Alignment

Despite these challenges, India's multi-alignment framework retains value. As former diplomat Sanjay Kumar Verma noted, "durable regional orders are rarely built by ignoring significant actors, however uncomfortable their presence may be". A more stable US-Iran relationship could widen the diplomatic space for India's multi-aligned strategy. However, this requires India to actively cultivate its relationships with all parties, rather than allowing its alignment with the US to crowd out its engagement with Iran.

8. Conclusion

This paper has critically examined India's diplomatic position toward the US-Iran conflict, analyzing the tension between New Delhi's stated commitment to strategic autonomy and its actual alignment with the United States and Israel. The analysis reveals a fundamental paradox: while India publicly maintained a discourse of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy, its diplomatic behaviour during the crisis—including its failure to condemn the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, its UN voting patterns, and its handling of the Chabahar project—demonstrated a discernible tilt toward the US-Israel axis.

This paradox can be explained by structural constraints including India's energy dependence, defence and technology ties with the US and Israel, economic integration with Washington, and the geopolitical imperative of countering China. These constraints made it difficult for India to exercise genuine strategic autonomy during the crisis, even as it continued to invoke the concept rhetorically.

The costs of India's diplomatic posture were substantial: damaged credibility, reduced regional influence, economic vulnerability, and diplomatic marginalization. The US-Iran peace agreement brought relief but also crystallized the strategic and diplomatic costs of a foreign policy that had quietly subordinated Indian sovereignty to the imperatives of the US-Israel axis.

For India's foreign policy going forward, the lessons are clear. Strategic ambiguity carries long-term credibility costs. Balancing between rival powers becomes increasingly difficult as relationships deepen. And the gap between discourse and practice—between the rhetoric of strategic autonomy and the reality of alignment—undermines India's claim to independent foreign policy leadership.

As India navigates an increasingly polarized world order, it must confront these contradictions directly. Genuine strategic autonomy requires not just rhetorical commitment but the structural capacity to pursue independent policies—a capacity that India's growing integration with the US, Israel, and the global

economy increasingly constrains. Whether India can sustain its multi-alignment framework in the face of these constraints remains an open question—and one that will define its foreign policy for decades to come.

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