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Navigating Great Power Rivalry: India's Strategic Hedging amid U.S.–China Competition after the 2020 Galwan Clash

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Abstract

The rivalry between the United States and China has placed India in a geopolitical dilemma, particularly following the 2020 Galwan Clash. As a middle power, India faces pressure to take sides, raising research questions about how India strategizes to navigate this competition. This qualitative case study analyzes India's strategy using Cheng-Chwee Kuik's hedging framework. The author argues that India has chosen to implement an adaptive hedging strategy to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid the risk of being drawn into conflict. The findings indicate that India's strategy is carried out through three main steps, namely active neutrality, inclusive diversification, adaptive balancing. This study concludes that the hedging strategy has proven successful in enabling India to leverage the competition between the world's two major powers to strengthen its national security and economy without sacrificing its sovereignty or foreign policy autonomy.

Abstrak

Rivalitas Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok menempatkan India pada posisi geopolitik yang dilematis terutama pasca Bentrokan Galwan tahun 2020. Sebagai kekuatan menengah, India menghadapi tekanan untuk memihak, sehingga memicu pertanyaan penelitian mengenai bagaimana strategi India dalam menavigasi persaingan tersebut. Penelitian kualitatif studi kasus ini menganalisis strategi India menggunakan kerangka pemikiran *hedging* milik Cheng-Chwee Kuik. Penulis berargumen bahwa India memilih menerapkan strategi *hedging* atau lindung nilai yang adaptif guna mempertahankan

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otonomi strategis serta menghindari risiko terjebak dalam konflik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi India dijalankan melalui tiga langkah utama, yaitu netralitas aktif, diversifikasi inklusif, pengimbangan adaptif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa strategi *hedging* terbukti berhasil membuat India memanfaatkan persaingan dua kekuatan besar dunia untuk memperkuat keamanan dan perekonomian nasional tanpa mengorbankan kedaulatan maupun kemandirian politik luar negerinya.

Keywords: Hedging, India, U.S.–China Rivalry, Strategic Autonomy.

Introduction

The rivalry between the United States and China has now reached its lowest point since the normalization of relations in the 1970s. This competition is no longer merely a routine trade dispute; it has shifted into a structural, comprehensive rivalry spanning multiple fields. Experts often call this phenomenon the "Second Cold War" or "Hybrid World War." These tensions are fueled by the clash of two major political projects: the "National Rejuvenation" initiative under President Xi Jinping and the "Make America Great Again" movement, which was launched by Donald Trump and subsequently pursued more systematically by Joe Biden.[1]

Both nations are vying for influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S.-China technological rivalry centers on dominance in AI, 5G, and semiconductors, where the United States restricts China's access through policies such as the CHIPS and Science Act and by blacklisting telecommunications companies like Huawei. In the security sector, tensions are rising in hotspots such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and the United States has responded with freedom-of-navigation patrols and strengthened strategic alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS. Economically, China is expanding its global influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects, which the United States and its allies are countering through the PGII initiative and "de-risking" policies aimed at relocating supply chains.[2]

Although the competition is fierce, these two giants remain bound by deep economic interdependence. Complete "decoupling" is nearly impossible, as it would devastate the global economy. Thus, their greatest challenge moving forward is managing this competition to prevent it from escalating into a destructive open military conflict.[3] Whenever one side expands its influence, the other will respond in kind. The impact of this rivalry is keenly felt by countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India. Within this rivalry, India occupies a key position as a middle power with significant regional capabilities and growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.[4] As a middle power, India cannot directly rival major powers such as the United States or China. However, it still possesses material resources, a strategic geopolitical position, and

diplomatic capacity that enable it to play an active role in shaping regional dynamics.[5]

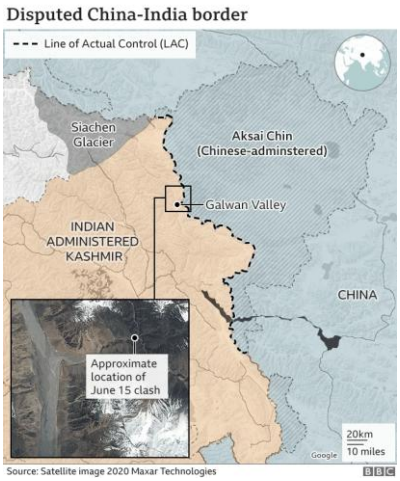
These characteristics drive India to adopt a flexible foreign policy approach that avoids direct confrontation. This is intended to preserve its strategic autonomy amid systemic pressures. In the context of U.S.–China rivalry, India's position as a middle power makes it not only the object of structural pressures but also an actor that actively navigates this competition through a combination of cooperation, balancing, and calculations of national interest.[6]

The increasing polarization of the international system should encourage countries like India to take a firmer stance by balancing against China or bandwagoning with the United States. Moreover, rising direct security threats typically narrow the space for strategic ambiguity. However, India has not fully moved toward a rigid alignment but has instead maintained the flexibility of its foreign policy through a hedging strategy.[7] This situation reflects the clash between international systemic pressures and India's desire to preserve its strategic autonomy.

As a middle power with limited capacity for open confrontation, India continues to strive to avoid dependence on any major power.[8] The tension between international systemic pressures and India's strategic preferences is concretely manifested in the dynamics of India–China relations, particularly in the border conflict in the Himalayan region. In this regard, the 2020 Galwan Clash served as a pivotal moment reflecting the intersection of global rivalry and regional disputes.

The Galwan Valley is a hilly border region located in Eastern Ladakh (India) and Aksai Chin (administered by China) in the Himalayas. Since 1947, India has claimed that the Galwan Valley falls within its jurisdiction and forms part of the border between India and Tibet. Then, in 1950, Tibet came under Chinese authority, thereby transforming it into the India-China border. Its location is crucial as it lies near the Line of Actual Control (LAC), an area prone to clashes between India and China.[9]

Figure 1. Map of the Galwan Valley



Source: (*BBC News Indonesia, 2020*)[10]

The Galwan clash that occurred on June 15, 2020, was the most significant geopolitical event between India and China since the 1962 Sino-Indian War. This event effectively ended the border stability that had been maintained for the past 45 years. The incident erupted in the disputed Himalayan highlands along the LAC. The Galwan clash was intense, violent, and unique. This was because the fighting involved close-quarters combat using rocks, iron rods, wooden poles wrapped in barbed wire, and iron chains.[11]

The absence of firearms signaled compliance with the protocols of the 1993 and 1996 agreements. These agreements prohibit the use of firearms along the border to prevent uncontrolled military escalation. Nevertheless, the physical violence that ensued resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. Intelligence reports estimate Chinese casualties at between 35 and 40. However, China itself has officially confirmed the deaths of only four of its personnel.[12]

The significance of the U.S.–China rivalry has become increasingly crucial in the Indian context following the 2020 Galwan Clash, which not only worsened India–China bilateral relations but also heightened the perception of a direct threat to India's sovereignty and territorial security. Under these circumstances, logically, the escalation of the border conflict should have prompted India to align more exclusively with the United States as a counterweight to China. However, empirical evidence shows that while India has strengthened its security cooperation with the United States, it has continued to maintain economic ties and diplomatic engagement with China. In this regard, India is employing a hedging strategy. This paper further discusses how India's hedging strategy addresses the U.S.-China rivalry.

This study's hedging strategy draws on Cheng-Chwe Kuik's conceptual framework. Kuik defines hedging as alignment behavior that maximizes insurance under conditions of high stakes and high uncertainty. This strategy is employed by middle and small powers to mitigate various systemic risks and maintain fallback maneuverability.[13] Specifically, this study asks: How has India's hedging strategy addressed the U.S.-China rivalry following the 2020 Galwan Clash? This study can strengthen the discussion of middle-power strategies in the U.S.-China rivalry, particularly in the context of hedging.

India's hedging strategy in the face of great-power competition has previously been discussed by Mehtap Kara (2025). However, Kara's study utilized Kuik's hedging framework, which was first introduced in 2008. Furthermore, Kara examined India's strategy in addressing the U.S.–China–Russia rivalry, resulting in an overly broad scope.[14] Furthermore, Nicolas Blarel (2024) limited his study to a regional focus on India's strategy in the Middle East within the context of U.S.–China rivalry. This article addresses these limitations by analyzing India's hedging strategy using Cheng-Chwee Kuik's latest framework, which focuses on U.S.–China rivalry following the Galwan Clash.[15] This study's novelty lies in its use of Kuik's (2026) hedging framework, which is well suited to the realities of the issue at hand. This enables the study to provide a more incisive explanation of how India employs hedging strategies amid structural pressures from the world's two current major power blocs.

Hedging by Cheng-Chwee Kuik

This study employs the concept of hedging developed by Cheng-Chwee Kuik in his paper titled "Theorizing Hedging: Explaining Shift and Variations in Alignment Choices" (2026). This concept arises from the limitations of the two main approaches in International Relations namely, balancing and bandwagoning in explaining how states respond to the rise of a great power. Until now, balancing has been understood as a state's effort to counter threats through military buildup or alliances, while bandwagoning refers to a state's tendency to align with the dominant power to gain advantages. Kuik himself highlights the need for an alternative analytical framework, which he then proposes through the concept of hedging.[16]

Kuik defines hedging as a form of alignment aimed at maximizing insurance or protection in a global political environment characterized by high stakes and significant uncertainty. This strategy is typically used by medium-sized or small states caught between competing great powers, allowing them to mitigate risks and retain maneuvering room if future circumstances change. Hedging is not a passive stance or mere neutrality; rather, it is an active, inclusive, and adaptive measure to ensure the state's survival.[17]

According to Kuik (2026), a hedging strategy can be identified through three key indicators implemented simultaneously.

1. Active Neutrality: This refers to a nation's concrete efforts to signal that it does not side with any of the competing major powers. This step is taken proactively to minimize dangerous risks, such as being caught in a conflict between major powers (entrapment), being abandoned by strategic partners (abandonment), or damaging diplomatic relations (estrangement). By maintaining active neutrality, a country strives to avoid being perceived as an enemy by any party.

2. Inclusive Diversification: where a country seeks to expand cooperative relationships in the fields of defense, diplomacy, and development with several major powers simultaneously. This strategy is inclusive because it does not limit cooperation to a single bloc but remains open to all competing parties. The primary goal is to prevent excessive economic dependence on a specific country or becoming a political subordinate of any major power.

3. Adaptive Offsets: This is the most crucial element of hedging behavior. It involves taking actions that deliberately appear contradictory or opposing to mutually neutralize risks. For example, a country may show deference in economic cooperation with a major power while simultaneously displaying defiance or strengthening its military to safeguard its sovereignty. This "dual" approach is carried out deliberately so the country always has a "Plan B" and can adapt if global security conditions deteriorate.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative, single-case study approach to analyze India's strategies for navigating the rivalry between the United States and China following the 2020 Galwan clash. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon comprehensively and within its context.[18] This study's data collection technique involves a literature review using secondary data relevant to the research topic. Data sources include relevant journals, the India-China Trade Report issued by the Embassy of India in Beijing, official statements from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, Quad Summit documents, BRICS and SCO documents, and media publications.

This study uses document analysis, a systematic technique for evaluating and interpreting printed and electronic materials as the primary data source. This analysis does not merely dissect the explicit textual narrative; it involves rigorous information screening, relevance verification, and the extraction of meaning aligned with the research objectives. Operationally, the data analysis process is conducted through three interconnected phases. Initial Screening (Skimming) maps out a general overview to ensure the documents' relevance to the topic. In-Depth Reading examines the content comprehensively

to extract substantive data. Interpretation builds coherent arguments from the findings based on the theoretical framework.

Result and Discussion

Active Neutrality India

The application of the "active neutrality" indicator in India's defense strategy following the Galwan Clash shows India's proactive efforts to signal impartiality toward both the United States and China. This stance was adopted to minimize various external risks looming over India's geopolitical position, particularly the risks of entrapment, abandonment, and estrangement.[19] Amid rising systemic uncertainty following 2020, India has positioned itself to avoid siding with either party in the U.S.-China rivalry.[20] This decision is not passive, isolationist, or stagnant. Rather, this active step is taken to secure strategic autonomy while keeping the door open for cooperation with any party.

This stance of active neutrality is clearest in India's firm refusal to transform its strategic partnership with the United States into a formal, binding military alliance.[21] The Galwan clash has eroded trust and highlighted the power asymmetry between China and India. However, India realistically continues to refuse to commit to collective defense arrangements such as NATO.[22] When the U.S. Congress proposed expanding the "NATO Plus" framework to include India in 2023, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar publicly rejected the idea. He emphasized that the military alliance model does not suit the nature of India's foreign policy.[23] This rejection aligns with deep skepticism among India's strategic elite toward forming a joint military command under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), underscoring that India strongly opposes being drawn into a Western-led, integrated military structure.[24]

As a consequence of this rejection of a formal alliance, India has proactively demilitarized the narrative of the Quad's agenda to avoid being labeled an exclusive anti-China military bloc. At India's strong urging, the Quad has consciously shifted its cooperation priorities from security issues to providing international public goods and addressing non-traditional security. The Quad's institutional focus was ultimately directed toward capacity-building issues such as the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, climate change mitigation, the governance of critical technologies, infrastructure development, and humanitarian aid.[25] In fact, when India agreed to Australia's participation in the Malabar Naval Exercises from 2020 to 2022, Indian officials formally separated these military exercises from the official Quad framework to mitigate potential strategic pushback from China along their still-tense land border.[26]

The maritime operational dimension also reflects very strict limitations on commitments as part of India's active neutrality. The United States has

repeatedly invited India to participate in joint freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China Sea. However, India has consistently rejected these invitations. India chooses to limit its military presence solely to bilateral or multilateral coordination exercises and is reluctant to be drawn into scenarios of direct confrontation engineered by the United States in the Western Pacific.[27] India's reluctance also stems from fundamental differences over international maritime law. Like China, India asserts its right to restrict foreign military activities within its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This has led to Indian ships being targeted on several occasions by U.S. Navy freedom of navigation operations.[28]

Through this neutral stance, India has tempered the United States' overambitious expectations that its investments would automatically allow it to control the direction of Indian politics.[29] From India's realist perspective, cooperation with the United States is highly valuable solely because it provides access to advanced military technology and ammunition to strengthen India's independent defense capabilities in the face of China. India has absolutely no interest in intervening to uphold the liberal international order or joining a foreign military coalition should a crisis arise in the Taiwan Strait. Given its geographical position as a direct neighbor of China, India is acutely aware of its physical vulnerabilities and vehemently refuses to be merely a bargaining chip or a military shield for U.S. hegemonic interests in Asia.[30]

Furthermore, India has remained steadfast in maintaining direct bilateral diplomatic channels with China following the Galwan Clash, and has consistently rejected any mediation or intervention by third parties, including the United States.[31] This is to avoid being drawn into an armed conflict between the United States and China. This commitment to an independent resolution is clearly reflected in the reactivation of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs, which has held 29 meetings to dateincluding the most recent one in Beijing in March 2024as well as 21 rounds of Corps Commander-level dialogues through February 2024.[32]

Although these talks remain deadlocked regarding troop withdrawals at crucial points such as the Depsang Plains and the Charding Nullah-Nimu (CNN) corridor in Demchok, India's decision to remain engaged in these complex negotiations sends a strong signal of its efforts to minimise the risk of diplomatic estrangement and prevent tensions from escalating into open war.[33] Through this intensive diplomatic engagement, India is actively reassuring China that its enhanced security ties with the United Statessuch as the signing of the logistics agreement and the iCETdo not constitute an offensive defence pact designed to attack China, but rather pragmatic defensive instruments to address the lopsided military power imbalance.[34]

In managing security conditions along the border, which remains characterized by a state of "no war, no peace," India has pursued a strategy of autonomy and exercised significant caution to prevent escalation.[35] On the domestic political front, this approach was demonstrated when India's Ministry of Home Affairs intentionally de-escalated public tensions by issuing a written response in parliament (Rajya Sabha) stating that there were no reports of infiltration along the India-China border.[36] This calculated action by Indian policymakers aimed to mitigate nationalist sentiment among the public and the domestic press, which could have constrained the government's flexibility and compelled the military to undertake undesirable offensive operations.[37] By describing China's military patrols as "border transgressions" resulting from differing interpretations of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), rather than as "intrusions" or deliberate territorial aggression, India fostered a sense of reassurance. This framing enabled both sides to agree on the withdrawal of local forces without either party incurring a political loss of face.[38]

On the other hand, India manages the risk of abandonment by foreign partners by rejecting absolute security dependence on others and focusing on strengthening its domestic defence capabilities.[39] To avoid becoming vulnerable if the United States' strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region shift, India is implementing the Atmanirbharta policy to build self-reliance in its domestic defence industry and meet its military needs.[40] This effort is reinforced by the accelerated, independent development of border infrastructure along the LAC, such as upgrading the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) tactical road. By strengthening internal logistics, India ensures its defensive capabilities rely on its own strength rather than uncertain external guarantees.[41]

Inclusive Diversification India

India's foreign policy has shifted significantly from traditional strategic autonomy toward a more pragmatic framework known as "Strategic Autonomy 2.0," often called "multi-alignment." At the core of this policy is India's ability to position itself as a "balancing power" that does not rigidly align with any single bloc, but rather forges partnerships based on specific issues of mutual interest.[42] By pursuing inclusive diversification, India uses multiple channels of cooperation with both the United States and China to advance its national interests without getting caught up in the two nations' hegemonic rivalry.[43]

One clear example of India's efforts to strengthen its security through cooperation with the United States and other democratic partners is its increasingly active involvement in the Quad. After initially hesitating to avoid upsetting China, India became a highly active participant following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash.[44] This momentum has been evident since 2021, when the first Quad Leaders' Summit was held, followed by India's consistent participation in the Quad Leaders' Summits in 2022 in Tokyo, 2023 in Hiroshima,

and 2024 in Wilmington.[45] Through the Quad, India has built a solid security framework to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region, while simultaneously strengthening its military interoperability with the U.S.[46]

The year 2022 marked a major shift in India's role within the Quad with the launch of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET).[47] In 2023, iCET was officially launched to strengthen partnerships in developing critical technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), space, semiconductors, and the transfer of GE F414 jet engine technology. This strategic cooperation continued to expand throughout 2024 and into 2025, positioning the United States as a key technology partner for India's defense modernization and helping counterbalance China's power.[48]

Although India is strengthening its security ties with the West, it simultaneously maintains its central role in non-Western organizations involving China, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).[49] Within the BRICS forum, India continues to actively serve as a bridge for the interests of developing nations (the Global South) even though China is a key member.[50] India hosted the BRICS Summit virtually in 2021, attended the Johannesburg Summit in 2023 and the Kazan Summit in 2024, and continues to participate actively throughout 2025.[51]

A similar dynamic is evident within the SCO, where India leverages this forum to manage regional security in Eurasia and combat cross-border terrorism. India assumed the leadership of this organization and hosted the 2023 SCO Summit virtually after previously serving as chair.[52] India's active role in the SCO, including its participation in the organization's activities, demonstrates that India continues to maintain a space for strategic dialogue with China to ensure a balance of power in Asia.[53]

The most interesting aspect of this strategy is the fact that India has not completely decoupled its economy from China's, despite severe military tensions along the border.[54] Instead, India has opted for a "de-risking" policy to safeguard its economic resilience.[55] Concrete evidence of this continued economic interdependence can be seen in bilateral trade data, which has actually continued to rise following the Galwan Clash.

Table 1. India–Tiongkok Export-Import Data

Fiscal Year	India's Exports to Tiongkok	India's Imports from Tiongkok	Total Trade
2020–21	US$ 21,19 M	US$ 65,21 M	US$ 86,40 M
2021–22	US$ 21,56 M	US$ 94,57 M	US$ 116,13 M

2022–23	US$ 15,31 M	US$ 98,51 M	US$ 113,82 M
2023–24	US$ 16,66 M	US$ 101,74 M	US$ 118, 40 M
2024–25	US$ 14,25 M	US$ 113,46 M	US$ 127,71 M

Source: *Embassy of India in Beijing, India-China Trade and Economic Relations*[56]

The data above shows that following the Galwan incident, bilateral trade volume even reached a new record high, confirming that economic interdependence remains a stabilizing force that prevents competition from escalating into open conflict.

By remaining active in the Quad and strengthening its iCET strategic cooperation with the United States, India is building robust defense and technological capabilities. At the same time, however, India remains institutionally engaged in BRICS and the SCO and maintains strong trade ties with China in the interest of regional stability and economic growth. In this way, India shows it can manage relations with two major powers simultaneously without sacrificing its sovereignty, avoiding complete dependence on either side.[57]

The high and steadily rising value of India's imports from China does not mean India has failed in its economic strategy. Rather, it reflects a measured "de-risking" dynamic under the "China-Plus-One" policy. Through the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, which has been intensified since 2021 in strategic sectors (such as electronics manufacturing and pharmaceutical raw materials/APIs), India has deliberately imported capital goods, assembled components, and raw materials from China to serve as domestic inputs.[58] This step was taken to gradually build industrial capacity and domestic manufacturing self-reliance without stifling national economic growth.

Adaptive Offsets India

The "adaptive offset" strategy has become a crucial tactical tool for India in navigating the rivalry between the United States and China after the 2020 Galwan Clash. As an operational pillar of hedging, this strategy requires India to pursue seemingly contradictory policiesnamely, combining selective deference with firm defiance toward both major powers.[59] Through this dynamic approach, India seeks to neutralize various external risks. By playing this adaptive dual role, India does not remain passive amid the competition but actively builds flexible strategic autonomy that lets it maximize benefits from one side without fully antagonizing the other.[60]

India's strategic partnership with the United States following the Galwan incident demonstrates a very neat blend of adaptive offsetsclose cooperation on the one hand, and strict limitations on commitments on the other.[61] As a

form of selective compliance and cooperation, India leverages its proximity to the United States to strengthen its military capabilities, which are disproportionately weaker compared to China's.[62] India approved the implementation of an agreement for the real-time exchange of geospatial intelligence data through the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in late 2020, leveraged encrypted communication technology under the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and launched advanced technology initiatives such as iCET in 2023 and the INDUS-X defense innovation platform.[63] These steps were taken because India urgently needs a supply of modern military equipmentsuch as the MQ-9B SeaGuardian drone and a co-production agreement for GE F-414 jet enginesto balance the asymmetry in military power along the Himalayan border.[64]

However, to mitigate the risk of being drawn into the United States' global geopolitical ambitions, India has counterbalanced these defense partnerships with firm refusals or defiant stances. India has consistently rejected U.S. offers to elevate the partnership to a formal military alliance on par with "NATO Plus." India has also firmly rejected its military's operational involvement in joint freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China Sea. This selective defiance signals to the United States that India is not a tool whose entire foreign policy agenda must be dictated by the United States.[65]

On the other hand, India's adaptive offset strategy against China is evident in a mix of tough defensive confrontation and flexible appeasement diplomacy.[66] Following the Galwan Clash, India adopted a clear policy of rejecting Chinese military activities along the LAC by deploying tens of thousands of additional troops to Eastern Ladakh.[67] India has also accelerated construction of DSDBO tactical road infrastructure to support military mobilization, while imposing domestic economic restrictionssuch as blocking dozens of Chinese digital apps, including TikTok, and tightening oversight of foreign investment flows.[68] These firm policies are intended to show China that India has strong national resilience and will not allow its territorial sovereignty to be trampled.[69]

India then counterbalanced this tactical equilibrium with de-escalation measures through bilateral diplomacy to prevent the conflict from escalating into a destructive open war.[70] India has consistently kept lines of communication with Beijing open through dozens of rounds of WMCC meetings and Corps Commander-level dialogues. Through these bilateral forums, India has been willing to make tactical compromises, such as withdrawing local troops from several flashpoints along the border.[71] Furthermore, India has avoided a complete severing of economic ties with China. Even amid intensifying geopolitical competition, China has once again emerged as India's largest trading partnershowing that India continues to prioritize its domestic economic development interests over rigid foreign policy stances.[72]

This combination of maneuvers shows that India's strategy of autonomy in navigating competition between the United States and China is not driven by blind hostility, but by a rational calculation of trade-offs.[73] Through this adaptive offset mechanism, India has positioned itself in a balanced state, leveraging advanced U.S. defense technology without surrendering its military sovereignty, while containing China's influence without triggering an open conflict that could undermine its economic stability. By continually testing and adjusting the boundaries of its compliance and resistance toward these two global giants, India has proven that it is not merely a pawn on the chessboard of U.S.-China competition. Rather, it is a sovereign, independent actor with the full capacity to chart its own future course in the Indo-Pacific region.[74]

Conclusion

Amid the U.S.-China rivalry following the 2020 Galwan Clash, India has neither balanced nor bandwagoned with either side. As a middle power in the Indo-Pacific region, India has consistently pursued a flexible, well-planned hedging strategy to maintain autonomy and independence in foreign policy. This strategy takes the form of three complementary key policies. India maintains active neutrality by firmly rejecting offers of formal Western military alliances such as "NATO Plus" and refusing to participate in joint military patrols in the South China Sea. India maintains a safe distance to avoid being drawn into disputes between major powers and resolves border issues with China through direct diplomatic channels without involving third parties. India also pursues inclusive diversification of its cooperation. On one hand, India strengthens its security and advanced-technology ties with the United States through the QUAD group and the iCET technology initiative. On the other hand, India remains an active member of BRICS and the SCO alongside China and maintains high levels of bilateral trade as part of its national economic security strategy. Furthermore, India employs an adaptive balancing strategy by combining cooperation with firmness. India leverages intelligence support and supplies of modern weaponry from the United States to counter the military power imbalance along its border regions. At the same time, India remains firm in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty along the Himalayan border while continuing diplomatic dialogue with China to defuse tensions and prevent the situation from escalating into open conflict. Thus, this hedging strategy has helped India reap security and economic benefits from both sides without aligning with any single major power.

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