

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

India and the Rising Costs of Strategic Autonomy

Ghadeer Nabizade

July 24, 2026

S*ummary*

While strategic autonomy remains a central principle of Indian foreign policy, the conditions under which it operates are becoming increasingly complex. As geopolitical rivalries deepen and strategic partnerships expand, preserving diplomatic flexibility requires increasingly greater political effort.

The United States–Israeli military campaign against Iran between June 2025 and April 2026 posed one of the most consequential foreign policy tests for India in recent years. Unlike many countries that found themselves broadly aligned with one side of the conflict, New Delhi occupied a far more complicated position. India had substantial, though unequal, strategic interests tied to all three principal actors. The United States remains one of India’s most important strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, Israel is among its closest defence and technology partners, and Iran continues to hold significant geopolitical value through connectivity projects, access to Central Asia, regional stability and longstanding civilisational ties.

The conflict unfolded in two distinct phases. The first phase began on 13 June 2025 with Israeli strikes against Iranian military, nuclear, security and strategic targets and culminated in direct US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. The second phase began on 28 February 2026 with a coordinated US–Israeli campaign targeting Iran’s Supreme Leader and was followed by strikes against Iranian military, security and strategic targets. Both phases quickly evolved into broader regional crises with implications extending well beyond the battlefield.

Rising tensions across the Persian Gulf generated concerns over energy security, maritime trade routes, and the possibility of wider regional escalation. For India, whose economic growth and regional interests remain closely linked to developments in West Asia, the crisis carried both immediate and long-term consequences. New Delhi responded by calling for restraint, de-escalation, and diplomatic engagement while avoiding direct attribution of political responsibility to any of the parties involved.¹

This unique position forced India to navigate a delicate diplomatic path. Open support for Tehran would have risked damaging relations with Washington and Tel Aviv at a time when India’s strategic competition with China continues to intensify. At the same time, endorsing military action against Iran could have undermined India’s longstanding ties with Tehran and threatened important economic and connectivity interests extending from Chabahar Port to the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

An additional indication of India’s carefully calibrated approach was New Delhi’s decision to send Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on behalf of the Government of India to sign the condolence book opened at the Iranian Embassy following the assassination of Iran’s Supreme Leader, an event officially described by Indian

¹ [**“Statement by Official Spokesperson on Ongoing Conflict in the West Asia Region”**](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 3 March 2026.

authorities as the leader’s “demise”.² The move attracted attention because India simultaneously maintained its cautious public position on the conflict, avoiding both explicit condemnation of the military campaign and political alignment with Tehran. While largely symbolic, the gesture reflected New Delhi’s effort to preserve diplomatic engagement with Iran during a period of heightened regional tensions.

India’s response reflected a familiar pattern in its foreign policy. Rather than aligning openly with any side, New Delhi emphasised restraint, dialogue and regional stability. Equally significant, however, was what India chose not to do. It neither condemned the United States and Israel in explicit terms nor offered political backing to Iran. Instead, it sought to preserve strategic space and avoid becoming entangled in a conflict that directly affected several of its core interests.

India’s Balancing Act during the War

To understand India’s cautious response, it is necessary to examine the different strategic interests that linked New Delhi to the principal actors involved in the conflict. Each relationship served a distinct purpose, making it difficult for India to align openly with any side without risking costs elsewhere.

The United States has emerged as a critical partner in India’s efforts to manage the shifting balance of power in Asia. Defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, advanced technology partnerships, and coordination within frameworks such as the Quad have steadily expanded over the past decade. Although India has significantly deepened strategic cooperation with the United States, Indian policymakers have continued to emphasise strategic autonomy and independent decision-making as core principles of foreign policy.³ The importance both sides attach to this relationship was further underscored during US Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s visit to India in May 2026, when he described India as one of America’s most important strategic partners.⁴

Israel occupies a different but equally important position in India’s strategic calculus. Over the past two decades, it has become one of India’s most reliable defence partners, supplying military equipment, missile systems, surveillance technologies, and expertise in cybersecurity and innovation. However, the relationship extends

² [“Foreign Secretary Shri Vikram Misri visited the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and signed the condolence book, on behalf of the people and the Government of India, on the demise of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamenei,” @MEAIndia, 30 May 2026.](#)

³ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2020).

⁴ US Department of State, [“Secretary Marco Rubio and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability,”](#) New Delhi, 24 May 2026.

beyond the defence sphere, especially after 2014. Economic, technological and connectivity interests have acquired growing importance, particularly as India seeks to expand its commercial links with Europe and the Mediterranean. Israel’s role in the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) illustrates how the relationship has evolved into a broader strategic relationship encompassing security, trade, technology and regional connectivity.

Unlike the United States and Israel, Tehran’s value to India is rooted primarily in geography, history and regional connectivity. Historically, Persia served as an important civilisational and commercial gateway linking the Indian subcontinent to West and Central Asia, leaving a lasting imprint on political, cultural and economic exchanges. In the modern era, India and Iran have often found common ground on regional issues, and Tehran has at times played a constructive diplomatic role during periods of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan.

For Indian policymakers, however, Iran’s contemporary significance is largely strategic. Iran provides a critical gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian region without requiring transit through Pakistan. India’s investment in Chabahar Port and its involvement in INSTC reflect a long-term effort to secure alternative routes for trade and connectivity. Moreover, although India had largely ceased importing Iranian crude oil before the 2026 war, Iran has continued to be viewed as a potentially important future energy partner. Given India’s rapidly growing economy, expanding industrial base, and rising energy demand, access to Iranian hydrocarbons remains a strategic consideration in long-term planning, even if sanctions and geopolitical tensions continue to constrain practical cooperation.

These overlapping relationships help explain why New Delhi avoided adopting a position that could be interpreted as unequivocal support for any side. From an Indian perspective, the conflict was not simply a confrontation between Iran and its adversaries. It was a crisis involving three countries with which India maintains important but fundamentally different relationships. The conflict also carried immediate practical consequences for India, many of which continue to shape Indian strategic calculations.

Continued instability in the Persian Gulf threatens energy markets, maritime trade routes, and the livelihoods and welfare of millions of Indian citizens living and working across West Asia and the Gulf states. For a government focused on economic growth, energy security and regional stability, preventing further escalation was not merely a diplomatic preference but a strategic necessity. The crisis therefore reinforced India’s determination to pursue a balanced approach that would protect its broader regional interests while minimising the risk of becoming drawn into the conflict itself.

External Costs of Strategic Autonomy

While India ultimately avoided a major rupture in its relations with any of the principal actors involved in the conflict, preserving this balance was not cost-free. The war exposed a series of external pressures that constrained New Delhi's room for diplomatic manoeuvre. These pressures did not eliminate India's strategic autonomy, but they increased the political and strategic costs associated with maintaining it.

The most significant external constraint on India's strategic autonomy during the conflict emerged from its relationship with the United States, which occupies a central place in its broader security strategy. Against this backdrop, the conflict involving Iran, Israel and the United States placed New Delhi in a difficult position. Any move perceived as openly sympathetic to Tehran risked generating friction with Washington at a time when India continues to depend on American cooperation in areas ranging from maritime security to advanced defence technologies. Although Indian policymakers remained committed to preserving strategic autonomy, the conflict illustrated that maintaining policy independence becomes increasingly challenging when a key strategic partner is directly involved in a regional crisis. In this sense, the cost of strategic autonomy was not merely diplomatic caution but the narrowing space available for independent political manoeuvring in an increasingly polarised international environment.

The conflict also exposed the constraints arising from India's relationship with Iran. Unlike many of India's other regional partnerships, relations with Tehran are closely connected to issues of connectivity, regional access and long-term energy security. India has invested considerable political and economic capital in projects such as Chabahar Port and the INSTC, both of which remain important components of its Eurasian strategy. During and after the conflict, however, several Iranian commentators as well as articles and comments published in Iranian media questioned whether India remained fully committed to these initiatives.

Particular attention was given to New Delhi's cautious diplomatic response to the Israeli and American military operations against Iran, the slow implementation of Chabahar-related commitments, and India's simultaneous participation in alternative connectivity initiatives such as IMEC. In several commentaries, these developments were interpreted as signs that India's expanding relations with the United States, Israel, and certain Persian Gulf states might gradually reduce the importance of Iran within New Delhi's regional calculations. Although such views do not represent a unified Iranian position, they nevertheless reflect an ongoing debate

within Iran regarding India’s reliability as a long-term important partner and the future direction of bilateral cooperation.⁵

India’s expanding partnership with Israel generated a further set of constraints. Any visible effort to move closer to Tehran risked creating doubts in Israel regarding India’s broader strategic priorities at a time when bilateral cooperation was expanding across multiple sectors. The challenge for Indian policymakers is therefore not simply to avoid choosing sides but to reassure multiple partners simultaneously that India’s engagement with one actor would not come at the expense of its relations with another. Maintaining working relations with Iran while preserving strong ties with Israel requires a level of diplomatic balancing that itself imposes political and strategic costs. The conflict demonstrated that as India’s network of partnerships expands, preserving diplomatic flexibility becomes less about remaining equidistant from competing actors and more about managing the consequences of increasingly interconnected relationships.

The growing interdependence of strategic interests makes the contemporary environment more challenging than in previous decades. India’s traditional approach has relied on maintaining sufficient diplomatic flexibility to engage competing powers without becoming overly dependent on any one of them. Yet as geopolitical rivalries deepen, the room for such manoeuvre gradually narrows.

To explain this, some scholars have argued that contemporary Indian foreign policy combines the traditional principle of strategic autonomy with an increasingly visible practice of ‘multi-alignment’. While strategic autonomy emphasises freedom from external constraints and independent decision-making, multi-alignment refers to India’s deliberate effort to cultivate simultaneous partnerships with multiple and often competing powers, including the United States, Russia, Israel, the Gulf states and Iran.⁶

The developments of 2025–2026 provide evidence for both interpretations. India’s refusal to align openly with any party reflected its continued desire for autonomous decision-making. At the same time, its calculations were shaped by the practical necessity of preserving relations with several actors whose interests were fundamentally at odds with one another. In this sense, the challenge facing New

⁵ See, for example, Annunthra Rangan, Interview, [“Strategic Ambiguity: New Delhi’s Mistake During the Iran War,”](#) *Iran Daily*, 28 April 2026; Fararu, [“Know Iran’s Strategic Friends in Crisis; Negative Point to India,”](#) 22 June 2026; Khabar Online, [“The Fragile India-US Relations After the Iran War; India’s Slow Pivot to China,”](#) 21 June 2026; Tang Bohu, [“Has the Time Come to Call India to Account for Its Betrayal of Iran?”](#) translated and republished by Tahririeh Studies Institute, 20 June 2026.

⁶ Rajesh Basrur, “Modi’s Foreign Policy Fundamentals: A Trajectory Unchanged,” *International Affairs* 93, No. 1 (2017), pp. 7–26; Jaishankar, *The India Way*

Delhi is not merely to remain independent but to maintain a delicate equilibrium among competing strategic partnerships.

Iran's Continuing Strategic Relevance

A further lesson of the conflict concerns Iran's enduring geopolitical relevance for India. While political debates surrounding Tehran often focus on sanctions, regional tensions, or its troubled relations with the West, Indian policymakers have traditionally viewed Iran through a broader strategic lens. Iran's geographic position continues to make it an important gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian region. This geographic advantage is reinforced by connectivity initiatives such as Chabahar Port and INSTC, both of which continue to offer India strategic alternatives to routes passing through Pakistan.

At the same time, Iran remains relevant to India's long-term energy calculations. As one of the world's major holders of oil and natural gas reserves, Iran represents a potential future source of energy diversification should sanctions and geopolitical conditions permit renewed cooperation. The war may have altered regional calculations and increased operational uncertainties. Still, it did not eliminate the underlying geographic and energy realities that have shaped India's interest in Iran for decades. Consequently, even as New Delhi deepens its partnerships with the United States and Israel, Iran is likely to remain a strategically significant partner.

Iranian Narratives on India's Strategic Position

The conflicts of 2025 and 2026 also generated a noticeable debate within Iranian strategic and media circles regarding India's response and the future trajectory of bilateral relations. Although these discussions emerged from diverse political perspectives—including government-affiliated newspapers, independent analysts, economic think tanks, translated foreign commentaries, and ideological publications—they broadly converged around two competing interpretations of India's conduct during the crisis. Together, these narratives illustrate how India's policy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment has been interpreted inside Iran under conditions of heightened geopolitical tension.

The coexistence of these competing narratives is itself significant. It demonstrates that even when New Delhi seeks to avoid explicit alignment, its behaviour is interpreted through different strategic lenses by different audiences. As a result, India's attempt to balance relations simultaneously with Iran, the United States,

Israel and the Arab Gulf states has produced contrasting assessments among Iranian observers regarding India’s long-term strategic reliability.

The dominant critical narrative argued that the conflict exposed a gradual but unmistakable shift in India’s regional orientation away from Iran and towards the emerging US–Israel–Gulf strategic framework. According to this interpretation, New Delhi’s cautious diplomatic response during the conflict reflected more than tactical neutrality. Rather, it demonstrated that India’s expanding strategic partnerships with the United States and Israel increasingly constrained its willingness to support Tehran during periods of crisis.

Particular attention was paid to India’s reluctance to explicitly condemn the Israeli and American military operations against Iran, despite maintaining diplomatic contacts with Iranian officials throughout the conflict. Within this perspective, several commentators portrayed India’s behaviour as evidence that New Delhi’s longstanding policy of multi-alignment was becoming progressively asymmetric, with growing dependence on Washington limiting India’s room for independent action. Some analyses argued that India had effectively subordinated parts of its regional policy to American strategic preferences, particularly regarding sanctions, energy imports and regional security arrangements.⁷

Economic and connectivity projects became equally important components of this debate. Iranian commentators questioned India’s long-term commitment to Chabahar Port, pointing to repeated implementation delays, uncertainty surrounding Indian investments following renewed sanctions pressure, and the simultaneous prioritisation of IMEC, which many analysts in Iran viewed as a competing geopolitical alternative to INSTC. Within this discourse, the perceived contrast between India’s slow progress in Chabahar and its active participation in IMEC reinforced concerns that Iran’s strategic importance within India’s regional connectivity vision was gradually declining. Several commentaries further argued that Tehran should reassess its future economic partnerships and give greater priority to countries that had demonstrated clearer political support during the conflict rather than those perceived as strategically ambiguous or unreliable during periods of regional crisis.⁸

A second, more moderate interpretation could be found in several Iranian analytical discussions focusing on connectivity, Eurasian integration, and India’s broader strategic calculations. This perspective is reflected in several strategic analyses

⁷ Rangan, Interview, “[Strategic Ambiguity: New Delhi’s Mistake During the Iran War](#),” *Khabar Online*, “[The Fragile India-US Relations After the Iran War; India’s Slow Pivot to China](#),”

⁸ Fararu, “[Know Iran’s Strategic Friends in Crisis; Negative Point for India](#),” Tang Bohu, “[Has the Time Come to Call India to Account for Its Betrayal of Iran?](#)”

discussing India’s regional role, connectivity initiatives, and foreign policy priorities, including articles republished by the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations from international think tanks. Rather than viewing India’s conduct during the conflict as evidence of a fundamental strategic shift away from Iran, these discussions emphasised the structural factors shaping New Delhi’s foreign policy, including its longstanding commitment to strategic autonomy, its expanding partnerships with major powers, and the constraints imposed by a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. From this perspective, India’s cautious response reflected an effort to balance multiple and often competing interests rather than a deliberate attempt to distance itself from Tehran.

Supporters of this interpretation further stressed that geography and connectivity continue to provide powerful incentives for cooperation between the two countries. Iranian discussions of Chabahar Port, INSTC, and India’s growing interest in Eurasian connectivity have frequently highlighted the enduring strategic importance of Iran as India’s gateway to Central Asia and the wider Eurasian region. These analyses argue that connectivity initiatives should not be viewed solely through an economic lens but also as instruments of geopolitical resilience, regional access and strategic flexibility. From this perspective, despite periodic political disagreements and implementation delays, the structural foundations of India–Iran relations remain intact because neither side possesses a fully satisfactory alternative capable of replacing the advantages offered by geographic proximity and established connectivity frameworks.⁹

Accordingly, this interpretation suggests that temporary tensions generated by regional crises should be understood within the broader context of long-term strategic interests. While India’s balancing strategy may periodically frustrate Tehran, proponents of this view argue that the enduring importance of connectivity, regional trade, Eurasian access, and potential future energy cooperation continues to provide strong incentives for maintaining constructive bilateral engagement.¹⁰

New Challenges to Strategic Autonomy

The experience of the 2025–2026 regional conflicts also raises broader questions about the future of India’s strategic autonomy. Beyond the immediate crisis, the conflict highlighted several structural trends that are likely to shape India’s foreign

⁹ Mishra, R., “[India’s Eurasian Turn: Why Central Asia Matters More Than Ever for India](#)”, Valdai Discussion Club, 6 July 2026; Persian translation republished by the [Strategic Council on Foreign Relations](#) (Iran).

¹⁰ Daniel Markey, “[Lessons for the US-India Strategic Partnership](#)”, Stimson Center, 3 June 2026; Persian translation republished by the [Strategic Council on Foreign Relations](#) (Iran).

policy environment in the years ahead. One emerging challenge is the growing polarisation of the international system. Competition among major powers has intensified across multiple regions, reducing the diplomatic space traditionally available to middle and rising powers. As geopolitical rivalries intensify, states increasingly face pressure to take clearer political positions during periods of crisis. For India, whose foreign policy has long sought to maintain productive relations with multiple centres of power simultaneously, this trend complicates efforts to preserve strategic autonomy while avoiding unnecessary entanglement in great-power competition.

A second challenge stems from the growing convergence of security, technology and economic competition. In previous decades, states could often compartmentalise their relationships, cooperating in one domain while disagreeing in another. Today, however, defence partnerships, technology transfers, supply chains, critical infrastructure and energy security are increasingly interconnected. As a result, decisions taken in one area frequently generate consequences in others. This interconnectedness raises the political and economic costs of maintaining balanced relationships with competing actors and narrows the scope for independent policy choices.

A third challenge arises from the expectations of India's expanding network of strategic partners. As India's international profile grows, so too do external expectations regarding its positions on major regional and global issues. Partners increasingly seek not only cooperation but also political alignment on matters affecting their core security interests. This expectation becomes particularly difficult to manage when those partners hold conflicting positions on the same regional crisis. The Iran conflict demonstrated how difficult it can be for India to satisfy these competing expectations simultaneously. Managing relationships with the United States, Israel, Iran, and key Persian Gulf states requires careful diplomatic calibration, and similar pressures are likely to emerge in future crises. The result is that strategic autonomy remains achievable, but preserving it may require greater diplomatic effort, more sophisticated balancing strategies, and acceptance of higher political costs than in the past.

The significance of the 2025–2026 developments, therefore, lies less in the immediate choices India made than in the structural trends it revealed. New Delhi successfully navigated the crisis without a major rupture in its relations with any of the principal actors involved. Yet the episode underscored a reality that Indian policymakers are likely to confront with increasing frequency. Future crises may therefore test India's strategic autonomy not because New Delhi lacks options, but because each available option is likely to carry greater diplomatic and strategic costs than before.

Looking ahead, the principal challenge for India is unlikely to be whether strategic autonomy should be abandoned. Rather, it will be how to sustain that policy in an environment characterised by intensifying great-power competition, expanding strategic partnerships, and growing expectations of political alignment. The 2025–2026 regional developments suggest that India still possesses significant room for diplomatic manoeuvre. At the same time, they demonstrate that preserving such flexibility is becoming more politically demanding and strategically costly than before. Ultimately, India’s approach towards the Iran crisis cannot be separated from the broader strategic challenge posed by China, which continues to shape New Delhi’s partnerships with both Washington and Tel Aviv. Strategic autonomy is therefore likely to remain a central principle of Indian foreign policy. The challenge for New Delhi will be not whether to preserve it, but how to manage the growing costs that accompany it.

About the Author

Dr. Ghadeer Nabizade is a researcher and writer specialising in regional order, Indo-Pacific geopolitics, Iranian foreign policy and Indo-Iran relations. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Islamic Azad University in Tehran and has translated books on diplomacy and international affairs into Persian.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2026