



US Tariff Policies as a Trigger for India's Strategic Realignment: Implications for Trilateral Dynamics among India, Russia and China

Dr. Kumari Anupam*

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
 Smt. B.D. Jain Girls' (P.G.) College, Agra Cantt. Agra

Abstract

This study looks at how the increase in U.S. tariff policies during President Trump's time in 2025 has served as a trigger for India's strategic shift in global matters, changing the relationships between India, China, and Russia. The study examines the impact of high tariffs, which can reach as much as 50%, on India's export competitiveness, economic growth, and weaknesses in labor-intensive industries. The text examines the restrictions and tensions within the US-India strategic relationship resulting from tariff-related sanctions connected to India's energy dealings with Russia, suggesting that this economic conflict has pushed India to strengthen its connections with China and Russia for energy and technological exchanges.

Using a comprehensive geopolitical perspective, this paper examines how American protectionism and deal-based trade strategies have encouraged New Delhi to expand its export markets, reinvigorate Eurasian and BRICS initiatives, and focus on its goals of a multi-vector foreign policy rather than sole alignment with the West. The findings underscore the perils associated with excessive dependence on Russian energy resources and Chinese supply chains, while concurrently highlighting opportunities for strategic autonomy and enhanced regional influence within organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS coalition. Recommendations are proposed for policy modifications aimed at fostering robust trade resilience, expanding market diversification, and implementing pragmatic diplomatic initiatives to safeguard India's global interests amidst evolving alliances and intensifying competition among principal powers

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*Corresponding Author:

Dr. Kumari Anupama

Email: anupamasurendra42@gmail.com

Since 2025, escalating US tariffs have fundamentally shifted India's economic and strategic priorities in its relationships with China and Russia. The imposition of tariffs

reaching up to 50% on Indian exports has led to trade disruption, loss of export competitiveness, and significant pressure on key labour intensive

sector such as textiles, gems and leather (lawdwer and Kumar 2025).

India's purchase of discounted Russian oil has been a major trigger for further US tariff hikes, deepening the friction between the two democracies and causing a breakdown in successful trade negotiations (Arora 2025).

In response, India has accelerated efforts to diversify its export market and cultivate closer economic and diplomatic engagement with both Russia and China. Russia energy supplies now representing more than a third of India's crude oil imports have become central to India's energy security, while payments in Indian rupees reflect growing insulation from dollar-based trade networks (heybatov 2025).

India's participation in trilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has intensified, positioning India as a critical player in Eurasian and multipolar global initiatives, even as border issues with China remain unresolved and competition persists in trade surplus and supply Chains (Salve 2025).

Strategically, these shifts reinforce India's autonomy and provide leverage against Western pressures, but they also expose India to vulnerabilities including increased dependence in Russia energy, exposure to supply chain and trade imbalances with China

and reputational risks of drifting from democratic allies (Krishnana 2025).

US lawmaker have publicly warned that tariff escalation is pushing India closer to China and Russia, urging a policy reset to repair strained ties and underlining the broader implications for Indo-Pacific security and the global economic order (Kuchroo 2025).

India, China and Russia have utilized various multilateral mechanism and forums to facilitate deeper economic cooperation in response to escalating US trade pressures.

Key Mechanisms and forums

BRICS: This platform has provided a platform for economic coordination, currency swap agreements, intra-bloc trade in local currencies and development funding through the New Development Bank. Recent summits have prioritized initiatives to reduce reliance on the US dollar, increase trade in national currencies and build alternative payments infrastructure to cushion against Western sanctions and tariffs.

SCO: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation enables trilateral dialogue and coordination on energy, infrastructure and regional security. The SCO summit 2025 in Tianjin saw India, China and Russia expanding cooperation in energy projects, regional investment and technology sharing, aiming to build supply chain resilience and facilitate cross border

commerce independent of US-centered networks (Nadajibulla and Chaudhary 2025).

Bilateral and Trilateral Currency arrangements: India and Russia have increased the use of rupee-ruble settlements, while India-China discussions have included greater yuan–rupee transactions and way to sidestep dollar-dominated systems. These arrangements directly buffer against the impact of US sanction and promote alternative banking technologies.

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Links: Russia’s leadership in the EAEU is gradually expanding investment opportunities for India in Central Asia and the Arctic, particularly in energy, logistics and infrastructure, facilitated by new trilateral framework and regional trade agreements (heybatov 2025).

Sectoral Working group and Summits: Regular sectoral working groups in energy, pharmaceuticals, food and mining convene between India, China and Russia coordinated through BRICS, SCO and trilateral summits to develop joint ventures and technology transfer agreements that circumvent Western barriers (ibid).

India’s reliance on Russian energy and Chinese supply chains has had a mixed impact on its strategic autonomy and global positioning, bringing both benefits and significant risks.

Effects on Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

Strengthened Energy Security through Russia: Access to discounted Russian oil provides India with vital energy security and supports economic growth while reducing dependence on unstable Middle Eastern supplies. This has enhanced India's bargaining power in energy markets while signaling resilience amid Western sanctions on Russia.

Supply Chain Integration with China: China remains a critical supplier of intermediate goods, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and raw materials essential for India's manufacturing sector. This dependency facilitates large-scale industrial production and export growth, underpinning India’s role in the global value chain (Choubey 2025).

Multipolar Positioning: Reliance on Russia and China allows India to adopt a multipolar foreign policy, avoiding exclusive alignment with Western powers and positioning itself as an independent regional actor influencing Eurasian geopolitics, BRICS, and SCO frameworks (Siddiqui 2025).

Principal Risks

Geopolitical Vulnerabilities: Heavy dependence on Russia’s energy exposes India to external risks from sanctions, supply disruptions, and diplomatic pressure from

Western countries, particularly the US, damaging India's strategic partnerships and economic relations (Thakkaer 2025).

Economic and Supply Chain Risks: Dependence on China for critical supplies exposes India to vulnerabilities from supply chain disruptions, geopolitical tensions, and trade restrictions, limiting India's industrial autonomy and economic security (Murali 2025)

Strategic Ambiguity: Balancing relations with Russia and China while maintaining ties with the US and EU creates diplomatic complexity and risks perceptions of ambiguity or double alignment, potentially undermining India's credibility as a reliable partner in global alliances (Siddique 2025).

Technological and Defense Constraints: India's reliance on military hardware from Russia and technological input from China could obstruct its goals for diversification and modernization, especially as the transfer of technology from Western nations faces increasing scrutiny due to geopolitical considerations. While India's dependence on Russian energy and Chinese supply chains bolsters its strategic autonomy and supports multipolar engagement and economic growth, it also introduces significant risks related to global political pressures, possible supply interruptions, and diplomatic uncertainties. Successfully navigating these threats is crucial for preserving India's position in a competitive and fragmented global

environment (Siddiqui 2025). India's abandonment off the US market in favour of China and Russia amid ongoing tariff disputes presents a complex set of opportunities and challenge.

Opportunities

Expanded Market Access and Resilience:

In response to the United States imposing substantial tariffs of up to 50% on Indian export, India has experienced a notable shift in its trade dynamics, resulting in considerable gains in markets such as China, Russia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Exports of marine products to China, Vietnam and Thailand have surged by more than 60% while Basmati rice, tea and pharmaceuticals have successfully attracted new buyers in Iran, the UAE, Iraq and Germany. The Indian government has identified 40 key countries and has actively promoted deep technology, manufacturing and supply chain integration, which has been instrumental in mitigating the losses incurred from the United States (5 Nov 2025, Times of India).

Strategic Autonomy and Multipolar Diplomacy: India's closer move towards Beijing and Moscow will uphold India's independence, in order to improve economic negotiation power in Eurasian forums such as BRICS, EAEU, and SCO and allow New Delhi

to hedge against US- centric disruptions and sanctions.

Russian energy and Chinese technology underpin India's security and industrial ambitions while diversifying away from dependence on any single market supports long term stability.

Sectoral Divers and Value Upgrading:

Exporters have shifted their focus towards higher-value segments, emphasizing branded clothing, processed food items and advanced pharmaceuticals. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) receive assistance for market adaptation, export incentives and integration into global supply chains thereby enhancing India's competitiveness on a global scale.

Risks

Geopolitical and Diplomatic Friction

The US and Western allies, who are still essential for cutting- edge technology, security cooperation and sizable market volumes, could become hostile if New-Delhi diversify towards China and Russia. Given that India is perceived as maneuvering between rival blocs, it may result in diminish worldwide influence and reputational difficulties.

Trade Imbalances and Economic Vulnerabilities

Asymmetrical trade is common with China. India imports a lot of machinery and intermediate goods, but it has trouble exporting its own goods. Russia and Central Asia have lower per capita GDPs, restricting market opportunities and possibly limiting export driven progress.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

New markets necessitate overcoming infrastructure bottlenecks, regulatory barriers and competition from incumbents, requiring significant policy coordination and domestic reforms. Indian exporters have to face different standards, logistical complexities and local competition, which increase political and operational burdens.

India's pivot from the United States towards China and Russia offers significant potential for economic robustness, enhanced regional sway and improved value chains, yet it also entails dangers of geopolitical estrangement, uneven trade dynamics and strategic susceptibility. To achieve enduring success, it is crucial to uphold balanced, adaptable, and reform oriented strategies, alongside investments in export competitiveness and diplomatic nimbleness (Jaishankar 2020).

In the immediate aftermath of US tariff implementation, Indian export and domestic industries have experienced divergent outcomes with specific sectors experiencing

gains while other have incurred losses. The extent of these effects is contingent upon the scope of the tariffs, the inclusion of product exemption and capacity of business to adapt. Sectors experiencing negative repercussions in the short term include: Textiles and apparel, this industry has been significantly impacted, facing tariffs as high as 50% on cotton garments. Consequently, Indian manufacturers have lost orders to competitors in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Mexico.

Gems and Jewellery: As the primary market for the Indian gems and jewelry, particularly diamonds processed in Surat, the US has imposed high tariffs. This has resulted in a substantial decline in exports, leading to significant financial losses and jeopardizing millions of jobs.

Leather and footwear: Tariff barriers and increased competition from producers in non-tariff markets have led to a decrease in exports and profitability within Indian leather and footwear clusters.

Marine Products and Agriculture: Key export commodities, including shrimp, rice, tea and spices, subjected to 50% duties have experienced a considerable downturn. US buyers are increasingly sourcing these products from alternative regional suppliers leading to a reduction in India's market share.

Engineering goods, Metals and Auto Components: Tariffs ranging from 25% to 50% have diminished demand for these products, compressed profit margins and compelled some exporters to withdraw from existing US contracts.

Sectors demonstrating positive performance in the short-term include

Pharmaceuticals: Indian pharmaceutical export, particularly generic drugs have largely remained outside the scope of these tariffs. Given India's substantial share of the US generics market, exports continue to expand driven by ongoing global health requirements.

IT and Digital Services: This sector is unaffected by goods tariffs. The export of software and business process outsourcing (BPO) service remains robust bolstered by favorable currency exchange rates and sustained demand from the US.

Selected Energy and Raw Materials: Certain commodities, including refined oil essential minerals and semiconductors have been exempted from tariffs, thus maintain export channels for Indian suppliers.

The immediate consequence of India's tariff changes reveal significant challenges for labour intensive sectors reliant on the US market, while indicating a degree of stability for pharmaceuticals, digital services and certain

raw materials. This situation emphasizes the necessity for strategic diversification of markets and agility within value chains (Kashyap 2025).

Russia India China: can the old troika deliver new gain:

The Russia-India-China troika, a trilateral forum originating in the mid-2000s, has historically functioned as an avenue for discourse among three Asian nations characterized by divergent geopolitical orientations. Once lauded as a potential nucleus for establishing a multipolar global framework to counterbalance U.S. hegemony, its efficacy in yielding novel strategic and economic advantages within the contemporary milieu, characterized by increased U.S. tariffs, heightened geopolitical rivalry, and evolving alliances, remains to be scrutinized. Yevgeny Primakov, Russian statesman later he became the Prime minister, visualised in the post-Cold War world RIC would be considered as a strategic group which will equalise American hegemony. Initially, the three nations sought to formulate a platform that encapsulated mutual interests aimed at fostering multipolarity, regional stability, and economic collaboration beyond Western-centric forums. However, persistent structural asymmetries in political-economic power, divergent strategic priorities, and prevailing trust deficits, especially between India and China, diminish the triadic potential.

But in the contemporary world economic protectionism, situation of trade war, and sanctions have started to reshape global economics to order to protect their interests Russia is insisting for the revival of RIC as a shield against political and economic isolation. But this alliance is very complicated. As Bloomberg notes, it has always been a “marriage of convenience”, burdened by mutual suspicion, historical rivalries and stark economic imbalances. Primakov’s idea was simply in theory- a triangle of Russia, China and India that could collectively counterweight American hegemony. After arbitrary actions taken by Trump administration regarding trade and tariffs Moscow’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has again advocated the cause (Singha 2025).

U.S. tariffs escalating to 50% on Indian exports, primarily as a reaction to India’s ongoing energy imports from Russia, have expedited India’s initiatives toward economic diversification primarily on the way to Russia and China. As well as diplomatic engagement within Eurasian forums like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Economically, the capacity of the RIC to generate new advantages is predicated upon complementarity, market accessibility, and integration. India's trade deficit with China persists at a critical level, exceeding \$100 billion on an annual basis, with Indian exports

encountering significant barriers to entry within Chinese markets. Although China plays a pivotal role in India's supply chains and technological inputs, enduring non-tariff barriers and strategic skepticism inhibit a more profound economic integration. Russia, with its comparatively smaller economy constrained by sanctions and structural impediments, is unable to absorb a sufficient volume of Indian exports to compensate for losses incurred in Western markets. Despite the significance of energy ties with Russia, entailing the procurement of discounted crude oil and collaborative ventures in nuclear and hydrocarbon domains—overall trade volumes remain relatively modest in comparison to those with China. India's strategic initiative to utilize the New Development Bank and advocate for the employment of local currencies in trade within the troika is aimed at diminishing reliance on the US dollar and the broader global financial system. However, persistent institutional weaknesses, differing economic models and geopolitical risks hinder the likelihood of swift, large scale integration. While there has been gradual progress in sectoral collaboration in areas such as defense, pharmaceuticals and technology there is an absence of holistic economic framework necessary to achieve transformative benefits.

Strategic and Security Implications

The external security dynamics of the troika are influenced by varying strategic perspective. Following 2014, Russia and China have significantly aligned their positions, collaborating on countering American dominance and enhancing their influence in Eurasia as evidence by their joint efforts in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. India while pursuing energy and defense ties with Russia and economic opportunities with China remains cautious due to ongoing border disputes with China and competitive aspirations for regional supremacy. This prevailing mistrust constrains the Troika's potential transformation into a formidable security alliance. India's strategy of defence diversification is manifested in the fortification of QUAD partnerships alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia which signifies a hedging approach. Consequently, the troika functions more as a diplomatic safeguard rather than a cohesive strategic entity, facilitating cooperation on specific issues without obligatory commitments. Nevertheless within the Indo-Pacific framework, the Russia-India-China (RIC) collaboration promotes dialogue in the face of increasing tensions, providing platforms for crisis management and presenting an alternative conceptualization of regional order that underscores multipolarity, respect for national sovereignty, and the principle of non-intervention.

Diplomatic Significance and Global Governance

At the level of international diplomacy, the RIC possess both symbolic and normative significance. It exemplifies India's aspiration for strategic independence, navigating a course between Western power and an increasingly assertive alliance between China and Russia. Furthermore, the troika facilitates coordinated advocacy for reforms in global governance, particularly in contexts such as the UN Security Council and international financial institutions, where India aspires to achieve permanent membership and equal standing. Through its participation in the RIC and BRICS, India strategically employs collective negotiation to counter unilateral sanctions frameworks and advance the interests of nations within the Global South.

Challenges to New Gain

Notwithstanding these advantages, significant obstacles persist. The absence of institutionalized mechanisms for enforcement, a cohesive vision, or effective dispute resolution within the troika undermines its operational efficacy. The entrenched mistrust between India and China, further intensified by border conflicts hinders political unity. Western sanctions have resulted in the isolation of Russia, thereby limiting the available resources for collaborative initiatives and increasing the risks for Indian enterprises engaged in Russian

operations. Moreover India's economic interactions with China and Russia are significantly overshadowed by its trade relations with the United States and the European Union, consequently, the troika cannot serve as a viable alternative to these established partnerships. The United States superior technological capabilities, capital markets and security alliances remain crucial, thereby restricting India's capacity for a comprehensive strategic realignment.

Way Forward: Conditions for revitalization

For getting core advantages, the RIC must advocate structural constraints. In the economic domain India must diversify its exports to China, reducing trade barriers, joint ventures in technology and manufacturing, building up Moscow-New Delhi green energy cooperation. At the security level India and China both countries should resume talk on border disputes to improve trust deficit. In order to reduce mistrust both countries must focus on "institutionalising cooperation" to create formal framework for dispute resolution and establish confidence building between these two nations. In order to maintain strategic autonomy without alienation in its foreign policy New Delhi must cautiously balance RIC engagement with its United States and Indo-Pacific partnerships.

Indian Products reaching America from Other Countries

According to the SBI research report, although exports to the United States have decreased, India has been diversifying its export markets, and certain Indian products might be entering America via other nations. The report highlights a rise in exports to countries such as the UAE, China Vietnam, Japan and Hong Kong, which could act as intermediaries. India is now exporting more to third countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nigeria, rather than directly to the United States and there are indications that these countries are importing goods from India and re-exporting them to the United States. This is known as the “triangular trade” or “indirect export strategy”.

US may lift tariffs if India stops buying Russian Oil

Currently, the US has imposed the highest tariff on India among Asian countries. Meanwhile, India’s comparative advantage is decreasing due to the improvement in US-China trade relations. After reducing oil purchases from Russia, it is now expected that the US will withdraw the 25% tariff which is related to Russian Oil purchases and will bring the total tariff down to 15%. It is believed that India will also reduce its import duty in return. Many experts say that India will reduce import duty more than 80% of American products. However it will maintain the security of

sensitive sectors like agriculture. (Dainik Jagran 24th November 2025).

Faltering American Economy

Every decision of President Donald Trump, who follows the America First campaign, be it international agreement or trade policy or security decision, is centered on the policy of imposing on others. Donald Trump, who has been slowing down the pace of globalization, has created a trade war by imposing tariffs on countries around the world, including India. The Trump administration is attempting to undermine the role of numerous multilateral institutions by either reducing funding or threatening to withdraw from them, which are allegedly not working in American interests. The impact of his policy is not limited to the outside of America but it is also having wide ranging economic and social impact within America. The trade war has not only disrupted foreign trade but also led to price increases in the US domestic market. The purchasing power of American consumers is being affected by retaliatory tariffs imposed by other countries in response to tariffs imposed by the United States. In the United States, not only everyday items but also electronic devices, toys, clothing and machinery have become more expensive. Since March 2025, imported goods have increased in price by approximately 4% while domestic goods have increased in price by approximately 2%. In America, rising

production costs due to the rising cost of raw materials for industries have not only become the reason of job losses but are also having a deep impact on the income of farmers. Retaliatory tariffs imposed by China, Canada and European countries have caused demand for American agricultural commodities like Soya and corn to plummet, leading to a decline in farmers' incomes and billions of dollars in government subsidies. The adverse effects on the American economy are now clearly visible. Analyses of Penn Wharton Budget Model suggest that Trump's trade policies could cause US GDP to decline by about 6% in the coming year and wages to fall by about 5%. The OECD said in its recent report that if tariffs and one sided trade policies continue US GDP growth could fall to 1.6% by 2026. This decline will be a case of concern not only for the US but also for the world economy as the US economy is the main engine of global trade. Trump's nationalist policies are proving to be even more challenging in the context of the faltering US economy (Singh 2025). While his slogan of "America First" supported domestic industries and at the same time his distance from global trade partnerships has had a negative impact on the US market. According to the Pew Research Center nearly 60% of Americans believe Trump's policies have increased economic inequality while providing no real benefits to the working class from his promises (Singh 2025).

According to economic analysts, Trump's "protectionist policies" have limited America's production capacity, which has increased layoffs in industries instead of creating new jobs. Trump's nationalism is not only causing of political polarization but is also causing economic imbalance. Policies pursued for short-term political gain are undermining both America's economic stability and global credibility in the long run. If this trend continues, the "America First" policy could shake America's own economic foundation.

At the same time India is playing its own game on the global stage. India is quietly maintaining its relations with Moscow. Foreign minister S.Jaishankar's repeatedly advocated "India Makes its own choices". From cheap Russian oil to joint defense projects and new trade routes, India is securing its economy and security on its own term. Meanwhile Washington watches closely will India lean west not really. India is balancing powers, keeping Russia close, US engaged and China in check. This isn't about choosing sides its about creating leverage. So India's foreign policy today is Multi-alignment over alliance. In recent Tianjin Summit, gave the big opportunity of these three countries, which has become the voice of global south and thanks to the Trump's Tariff to keep joint hands together of these three countries powerfully and no need to take approval from the Washington to form to its own club. Where Moscow is not isolated,

Beijing can still shape the global agenda and India cannot be pushed to backside.

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