



Domestic Fundamentalism, Strategic Traps and Indian Offensive Strategic Behavior: A Neo-Classical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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The paper examines the relationship between two variables to understand contemporary offensive posture in India's strategic behavior at the regional and international levels. First, Hindutva fundamentalism, as a domestic variable, and the structural dictation named strategic traps. The analysis uses a neo-classical realist approach to understand the emerging offensive character of Indian strategic behavior at the regional and international levels. The design uses the explanatory method and deductive reasoning for analysis. Hindutva ideology increasingly shapes India's domestic political landscape, resulting in a new orientation in its governance structure. It also led to offensive approaches in India's foreign policy and security decision-making. The strategic consequences of this fundamentalist governance heighten the risks of miscalculation at the regional and global level. The strategic traps are also dictating India's offensive behavior, as major powers did not endorse India's bid to join the NSG. As a result, India is adopting a reactive, fundamentalist approach in its strategic moves.

Keywords: India, Fundamentalism, Hindutva, Strategic Traps, Neo-Classical Realism

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1.0 Introduction

The causal relationship between the rise of Hindutva and an Offensive Policy Posture gradually influenced India's foreign policy behavior. Three prominent domestic drivers, integrated within India's emerging fundamentalism, shaped India's contemporary offensive posture in its strategic decision-making. Number one among them is the causal relationship between Hindutva Rise and India's Offensive Policy Posture. The political rise of right-wing Hindu extremism not only increased societal polarization in India but also shaped new parameters for strategic thinking in India. With inward and outward implications, the cultivation of this extremist philosophy decomposed Indian identity as a secular state. This resulted in a domino effect on the political structure. Resultantly, a hyperactive political environment has grown up throughout the last decade that is leading towards offensive approaches in security-related policymaking.

The international political system is also based on a 'friends of good times' approach. This realist foundation of state-to-state relations does not provide any guarantee that states will blindly trust or exaggerate their ties with others. However, in the South Asian case, India's historical dependence on Russia for arms imports severely damaged its strategic balancing vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. The US, on the other hand, adopted a new policy orientation towards Asia Pacific, mainly focused on China's containment. US strategists initially considered India an essential actor in pursuing this objective. In comparison, India misperceived this role and hastily joined this US strategic move. It created an imbalance in Indian foreign policy towards major powers.

The BJP government under Modi took hard decisions in domestic politics due to its fundamentalist nomenclature. These characteristics of leadership and the political elite seem to have led to irrational and hasty decisions in its strategic ties with other states. As a matter of fact, the effect of Hindutva-based nationalism not only deteriorated the domestic fabric of India's political structure but also caused serious cuts on its foreign policy behavior.

2.0 Literature Review

The study is framed within a neo-classical realist approach. The neo-classical approach within realist domains of international relations theory has dual characteristics. First, it maintains that realism's core characteristics are essential for understanding a state's behavior. The second characteristic is domestic variables, which give it a more exclusive nature within realism. The gradual transition in the foreign or strategic behavior of states involves changes in their domestic thinking processes. These processes also shape foreign relations through a nation's thinking (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013).

The structural imperatives of Indian strategic decision-making at the regional and international levels are heavily influenced by the intervening variable of domestic political evolution. Although the structural dictations have their own characteristics, the BJP leadership in India is socialized through ultra-right-wing religious fundamentalist nurseries like RSS and HVP. The domestic dimensions have also shaped their thinking processes. (Waltz, 1979) The theory of structural realism explains state behaviour primarily through external influences. Whereas the neo-classical realist like Ripsman and Talferro (2016) extended this approach to integrate the evolutionary processes of the minds of leadership and strategic thinkers.

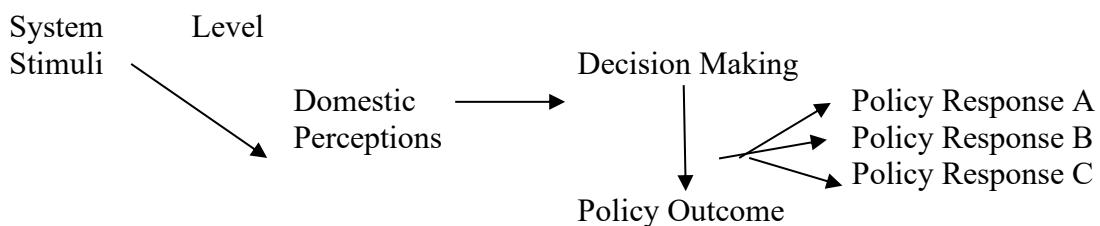
The Ministry of External Affairs of India publicly announced new conditions for the use of nuclear weapons as a real part of warfare strategy in January 2003 within the framework of NFU (*The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Perationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine*, n.d.). It is observed that since 2003, the Indian government and the military establishment have paid serious attention to modernizing the military capabilities. A significant portion of this military modernization centers on nuclear counterforce options. The upgradation, purchase, and development of new delivery systems over the last two decades provide sufficient evidence to understand India's changing nuclear behavior. These integrated developments in areal capabilities, missile technology, submarine projects ("India Submarine Capabilities," 2022). The air defense systems were publicly projected by the Indian authorities as part of nuclear diplomacy, with the 'threat of force' at its core. Meanwhile, India also achieved significant success in space technology, indicating its future ambitions to join the ranks of the great powers. Thus, the nature of conflicts at the Asia-Pacific gate will no longer be traditional.

The neo-classical framework provides a synthesis (Taliaferro et al., 2009, p. 31) and an upgraded version of the classical realist approach, ensuring that a state's position in the global structure is primarily determined by its material power (Rose, 1998, p. 146). However, the intervening variable at the unit level can influence both its global positioning and decision-making. Domestic pressures and variations actually make this framework distinct from the neo-realist understanding of state behavior (Rose, 1998). In counterforce strategies, both intervening variables play complex roles in shaping the impact of structural variables. The neo-classical commentators believe that the interpolate theorists are misguided (Rose, 1998, p. 151). To avoid this problem, the neo-classical framework offers a dual validity model to understand a particular foreign policy behavior better.

3.0 Methodology

The paper follows an in-depth study approach. The qualitative nature is rooted in the specific evolution of Indian policy behavior in its external affairs. The data used in the study are secondary. However, few speeches of political leaders were also reviewed to understand the evolution of Indian political leadership and its processes—no statistical tools or software were used in this study. Several research articles, newspapers, and official websites are also part of the study to identify the dimensions of the issue area. The study falls within the parameters of deductive reasoning, and the neo-classical realist framework provides as a guideline for reaching the conclusions. The neo-classical realist model given by Norin N. Ripman is gateway for analysis.

Fig. 1.1 Neo Classical Realist Model given by Norrin M, Ripsman



4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 The Domestic Fundamentalism and Political Evolution

The Hindu nationalism based on Hindutva ideology have grown-up rapidly during the last few decades in India (Ramachandran, 2020a). Before 1993, the political landscape of India was dominated by Indian National Congress (INC). In December 1992, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shiv Sena (SS), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) jointly declared a violent movement against the Muslims in India and destroyed the historical Babri mosque in Ayodhya. The event was followed by the killing of thousands of Muslims in India, particularly in Mumbai. BJP and other aligned violent organizations managed more than 150,000 extremist Hindu members to take part in these events which resulted in a serious societal conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India (Malji, 2018, p. 41). The VHP and RSS were hardcore Hindu militant organizations that played a vital role in the Muslim genocide in Gujarat in the post-Babri Mosque event.

The second phase of genocide was led by Narendra Modi who was affiliated and a lifetime member of the Hindu militant RSS group and became famous due to his active participation in violent events and representation of the low-caste Hindu section in the early 2000s. As he himself was a low-caste Hindu militant leader, a majority of the Hindu low-caste portion in Gujarat got inspired and accepted this representation which opened a new chapter for his political career. The continuation of the Muslim genocide and ethnic cleansing (Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002). in India was one among several reasons for the Indian failure to control Kashmir's freedom struggle. The destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and a declared Muslim genocide by the Hindu militant organizations (Hartung et al., 2004, p. 10) sarked a new lease of life to the Kashmir liberation movement during the 1990s. It was the same period when US interests and preferential foreign policy in South Asia came to an end with the disintegration of the USSR. On the other hand, the support for Jihad in Afghanistan and the ultimate defeat of the USSR presented a war model for the armed freedom struggle in Jammu and Kashmir. These two parallel factors laid the foundations for new counterforce military orientations in New Delhi.

The RSS, SS, and VHP framed an ideological road to establish a new state of political exceptionalism based on religious identity instead of its secular posture. The Hindutva extremist philosophy emerged as a pillar of India's structural foundations. With the Nuclearization of India in 1998, the discussions to secure and expand Hindutva drew New Delhi's new road to demolish its secular identity that ultimately matured in 2014 as BJP and allied Hindu nationalist forces came into power. This idea of Hindu Rashtra subsequently became a catalyst in India's domestic politics. The footprints of a fundamentalist approach in the BJP can be traced through its historical linkages with VHP and RSS, which represented hard-core believers in Hindu Rashtra (the concept based on the establishment of a true and fundamentalist Hindu State) (Ramachandran, 2020, p. 15)

The expanded version of Hindutva extremist ideology, coupled with its policy of demographic manipulation, engendered an environment of uncertainty and apprehension within the region. Attempts at resettling Hindu Pandits, while ostensibly aimed at addressing concerns of

displacement and fostering communal harmony, were viewed with suspicion by some segments of the population. These efforts were perceived as part of a broader strategy to alter the demographic composition of Jammu & Kashmir, potentially impacting its political landscape and diluting its distinct identity. The pretext of facilitating the return of Hindu Pandits to the region served as a cover for Indian endeavors aimed at altering the demographic composition, thereby instilling a fresh wave of apprehension and instability in the area.

The rapid nuclear evolution in post 1998 played as the second catalyst in changing strategic posture of New Delhi. Indian nuclear evolution has a long history; however, since 1998, massive reforms and improvements have been introduced in the nuclear command and control structure. The expansion of nuclear security regime in India brought diversity and strength to the nuclear security issue. On the other hand, political elite and military establishment in India gained 'nuclear confidence' that refers to their self-imaging to bid as valid nuclear power in the region and beyond. During the same period, India has maintained close ties with the global nuclear regime to achieve its goal of attaining *de jure* nuclear status (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2018, p. 2). Third, the leadership's desire to join the great power contest sparked a debate over revising NFU at large. The BJP government has been projecting and propagating larger role of India in global politics since 2014. Many scholars in India are establishing a discourse on China-India contestation as a new regional debate that encompasses all aspects of power and politics (Loots, 2024, p. 655). However, the evolving discussions are not based on a clear 'tit for tat' formula (Colley, 2023, p. 250) as both states have global endeavors beyond the traditional security dilemma. However, India's core idea is to build a new strategic narrative with China centric deterrence approach. Resultantly, Beijing's nuclear posture has seemingly changed in last few years (Hiim et al., 2023a, p. 147) that have opportunities for India to justify plausible and reciprocal offensive policy responses at home. A nuclear deterrence posture does not dominate China's security architecture with respect to its overall counterforce strategy (Hiim et al., 2023b). But India's approach to building a new nuclear counterforce strategy needed a justifiable reason. The debate over changing nuclear policy did not remain secret, as the issue was discussed in Lok Sabha (Lok Sabha Debates, 2022, p. 789). By the end of first decade of twenty first century, the military establishment in India was also convinced that NFU is a flawed policy that does not fulfill the changing regional and global strategic environment (Guest Column | Checks and Balances -, n.d.).

Statistical data on China's nuclear force shows that it is larger in number and superior in technology compared to India (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2018, p. 80). At the same time, India's nuclear reliability in terms of NFU policy is considered 'weakened commitment' (Chambers et al., n.d., p. 8). Despite these facts, the political leadership has consistently and shrewdly advocated several practical actions that reflect a no-first-use (NNFU) message. There are some media reports on connections between the BJP and the Hindu right-wing fundamentalist organization RSS regarding the change of NFU policy. It is evident that RSS played a vital role in the BJP's political victory and thus has no reason to completely reject the influence of RSS on New Delhi's security policy.

4.2 Strategic Traps and India's Strategic Behavior

The international power structure has characteristics that ultimately dictate that states adopt

particular foreign policy behaviors. The distribution of power and the ongoing status of threat perceptions on the political canvas compel all states to maintain and augment their power by all means. Current patterns in international structure classify power clusters into three categories: great powers, middle powers, and small powers (Fels, 2016). This evolution has also shaped shifting allegiances at the regional level. Simultaneously, the great powers encouraged regional security paradoxes as a strategic trap to maintain the status quo. In a real neo-realist world, this type of arrangement provides an opportunity and space for middle-level powers to misperceive stature as equal to threat.

In the Asian power cluster, a similar structural dilemma emerged, leaving India in a lock. The US off-sure balancing gave space for India to mis(perceive) itself as a potential great power that seeded its security paradox with China. As a result, India tends to adopt security policies that could 'retain its credibility of countervailing China'. India and the US have a history of an unfriendly relationship (Bukhari, 2021, p. 45). However, the US has limited options in Asia to counter China's ambitions. The geographic, economic, political, and strategic parameters of India perfectly match with US strategic approach to contain China's potential power to challenge US global primacy in the 21st century. US policymakers adopted a new political phenomenon in recent US national security policy documents, which endorse India's narrative of the Indo-Pacific (Mattis, n.d.).

4.3 The Global Strategic Trap

The US grand strategy in Asia is playing a vital role in shaping India's enhanced nuclear posture, along with other structural factors. The two Nuclear Peer threat perceptions (Creedon et al., 2023) define the US's updated foreign policy posture towards India. From unfriendly relations to cordial ties, the bilateral ties are now dominated by US primacy. The assessment reports on external threats to the US until 2035 (Creedon et al., 2023) reveal that the US has seriously considered two nuclear peer adversaries (Creedon et al., 2023, p. 7). China's increasing ties with Russia have also raised new strategic questions at the Eurasian corridor. To address the matter, the US has given India strategic space in the Asian nuclear equations. This section of the US grand strategy culminated in new foundations for India to think about a leading role in the region. The requirements of counterforce strategies and their potential political implications are another serious aspect relevant to US nuclear threat assessments (Long & Green, 2015, p. 4). The new passage to Indian emerging aspirations is thus more dependent on external strategic leverage than on domestic variables. It also implies that any fluctuation in the US strategic approach towards potential adversaries i.e., China and Russia can instantly influence India's positioning in the current strategic great game. Simultaneously, India's traditional friendship with Russia has deep military, economic, and political roots. New Delhi's shift in allegiance from Russia to the West is passing through an initial phase. However, Moscow will never allow India to enjoy absolute Western partner status in the region. By and by, a rapid and long-term transition in the Indo-US strategic partnership is unlikely, particularly in the context of Russia-China peer settings for the regional and global political canvas.

The US foreign policy approach is based solely on securing its primacy, which changes

with changing external variables. The friendship proposal to New Delhi thus has a limited package, as there is no other suitable option for Washington in the region. In the case of China, for example, the US historically followed a cooperative approach and 'welcomed China's rise' (Obama: "We Welcome China's Rise" - CBS News, n.d.). The leverage over China sparked a new power contest that challenged US global primacy. With such historical experiences, the US would never go for full-fledged support for India's regional or global rise to the extent that it would become a potential challenge to US influence, but would engage India within specific limitations within the strategic trap. Consequently, the US policy of cooperating and competing with China ("Ending the Strategic Holiday," 2014, p. 183) has a similar application to the US-India case.

The strategic trap of major powers entails strong, unavoidable long-term reparations. In India, the civil nuclear deal was initially perceived as a major step toward membership in the nuclear supplier's group (NSG). But it did not work and Indian efforts to get NSG membership failed. It also paved the way for a new seed in New Delhi's thinking to build nuclear parity with China. However, Beijing never gave India any space to achieve legitimate nuclear power status. In this scenario, India's chances of breaching the major power structure remained minimal. But the intensity of aspirations, mis(perceptions), and misadventures increased under the same strategic trap by the US. This phenomenon has influenced nuclear counterforce decision-making in India since the initiation of Indo-US rapprochement.

The Indo-US civil nuclear deal was perceived as a partial success and was pronounced a *de facto* acceptance of India as a legitimate nuclear power (Drollette, 2016). However, India's insecurity level seemingly increased in South Asia, clearly aggravating nuclear tension with Pakistan. (Drollette, 2016) In the last ten years, South Asia witnessed a rapid increase in nuclear-capable missile inventory which shows that the US-India strategic forge did not offer any support to regional stability, particularly when it overlooked the core issue of Kashmir (Drollette, 2016).

Despite increased participation in global partnerships, mainly due to changes in US strategic policies, India's regional influence waned (Jacob, 2024). The clash between aspirations to achieve global power status and the regional security dilemma has eroded India's stable behavior as a responsible nuclear state, an essential characteristic for moving forward and building the required global stature. The discussions and discourse on small-scale, targeted nuclear engagement with Pakistan, on the other hand, indicate a shift in India's nuclear policy and tactical approach (Clary & Narang, 2019, p. 8). Simultaneously, it intensified aggressive policies and practices, and heightened the temptation to augment counterforce in the region. The 2024 Stockholm International Peace Research (SIPRI) report claimed that India, along with other *de facto* nuclear powers, is escalating nuclear counterforce capabilities through efforts to deploy nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles (Role of nuclear weapons Grows as Geopolitical Relations Deteriorate—New SIPRI Yearbook out Now | SIPRI, 2024).

4.4 Regional Strategic Trap

The second strategic trap exists at the regional level routed through Pakistan where China kept India in continuous fear of nuclear war trauma. This portion also shapes India's nuclear policy posture and is linked with the South Asian security paradox. China's unprecedented military and

economic support to Pakistan through scientific, technological, and connectivity policies is a viable way to defuse India's contestation. India presents China's nuclear arsenals as a justification to increase and amplify its nuclear stance however, the real nuclear threat perceptions in New Delhi are still rooted in Islamabad. China's strategic trap to restrict India has three objectives. First, to continuously keep India insecure from its traditional contestant, Pakistan. Second, to discourage any situation that has the potential to strengthen Sino-Indian parity in the global power structure. Third, a non-preferential nuclear counterforce approach towards India.

China-Pakistan friendship is unmatched, non-fluctuated, and unbreakable till time. Pakistan's nuclear inventory did not generate any sense of insecurity in Beijing nor has Pakistan got any strategic discomfort with China's nuclear arsenals. This reciprocity can be considered as a litmus test to gauge Pakistan-US or India-US and vice-versa mis(perceptions) with regards to nuclear policy postures. China is the beneficiary of this Indo-Pakistan nuclear equation in the region. To maintain the status quo, China did not openly criticize Pakistan's undeclared nuclear policy posture. As a result, this model helps ignite a downward spiral in Indian counterforce temptations and in restricting them to revolving around Pakistan. Interestingly, China is also engaged in economic and trade relations with India. Although these engagements reduced the risk of a plausible nuclear war between the two states, they did not overcome the trust deficit.

On the other hand, there is no space for strategic cooperation that left India vulnerable in the global political arena. India's unsuccessful NSG bid, a step back in border skirmishes, and failure to compete with China on the Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are the most visible developments that denote China's superiority on the region's strategic canvas. Finally, China never adopted a preferential nuclear counterforce approach towards India. It simply means that China has never entertained India's aspiration for great-power status, nor has it considered India a competitor or challenger. The inward application of this strategic trap culminated in a frustration-aggression aptitude for India's nuclear policy mechanism. Its operational capabilities and nuclear counterforce strength have rapidly grown up during the second decade of the 21st century. Meanwhile, India portrayed.

China as the largest threat to its security (Kristensen et al., 2024, p. 329). A traditional nuclear posture however was quite different and a regular part of India's official narrative on nuclear use. Based on a defensive posture, it essentially emphasizes containing 'China without any increase in defense spending or major restructuring' (Dougherty, 2019, p. 5). But the reports on India's military modernization and nuclear stockpiles prove the status otherwise. It would not be easy for India to justify a defensive posture in a scenario where it has acquired a set of ready plutonium for 210 nuclear weapons(Kristensen et al., 2024, p. 326), deployed of recent Agni series of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles with declared extension(Kristensen et al., 2024, p. 328), induction of new nuclear submarine(London, 2024), and swift up gradation of Airpower through heavy investments to import 36 Rafale fighters(Kristensen et al., 2024, p. 328). These developments establish a stronger posture on nuclear counterforce measures and create a new hurdle to India's aspiration to join the NSG or the great powers structure.

The third strategic trap has originated from Russia's extended version of foreign policy

behavior in near abroad particularly in the Asian region. On the one hand, Russia revised its strategic dogma by containing the Eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, at the same time, forging ties with China's friends. The emerging Russian role in global politics has characteristics similar to those during the Cold War bipolarity. Russia has a long history of military and political influence in New Delhi. Reducing military and economic interdependence has alarming caution in Moscow. Nevertheless, India's absence from non-Western de facto allies will not be favorable to Russia.

Russia is currently pursuing a distinct strategic maneuver to curtail India's bid to be part of the great powers club via the Western route. With a long friendly history, Moscow is aware of New Delhi's nerves. Thus, an indirect approach to revisit its policy in the South Asian region is the new agenda of its 'reaching East' strategy. First, under Putin's government, relations with Pakistan have been reoriented through frequent state-level interactions. The strategic perplexity of Moscow's new approach to its foreign policy toward Pakistan has definite implications for the overall South Asian security architecture. During the last decade, rapprochements at military, economic, and political levels have confirmed Pakistan's importance for Russia in the new 'great game. Second, Russia's ability to marginalize India's position will subsequently influence New Delhi's dilemma in choosing a security partner in contemporary global power contestation. Insofar, as the strategic trap of Russia has culminated in a red line for India with no exit. The Ukrainian war was the first serious test case for emerging powers that has been taken as a litmus test by great powers to gauge the basic scale of 'with us' and 'with them' in the post-cold War era. India is still reluctant to choose the 'with us' camp. Russia successfully managed energy exports to India during the Ukraine war which reflects Moscow's influence in New Delhi. The 2+2 foreign defence meeting between India and the US proved Russian-structured pressure on India not to endorse the American proposal to condemn Moscow ("India, US Send Clear Signal," 2022).

The Sino-Russia reorientation of bilateral ties and convergence in the new great game can play a vital role in restricting the US in the greater Asian region. New Delhi is not comfortable with the growing Sino-Russian entente cordiale (Crabtree, 2024). The reason is plausible, as India will have no choice but to rely on Russian military assistance in any conflict or war with China (Crabtree, 2024). However, Russia behaves like a great power, portraying itself as an influencer in India's policy postures. Though the situation will foster India's trajectory towards the US and the European states, a prompt departure from the Russian power circle is not a rational choice for India.

4.5 Unfolding India's New Strategic and Counterforce Posture

The offensive strategic and counterforce posture of India has abruptly changed traditional and non-traditional military strategies in the South Asian region. New Delhi failed to grasp the Western power-balancing approach. The first stage was the mis(conception) of US strategic needs in the region to contain China. New Delhi miscalculated that India was the only option for the US to keep China at bay from the competition. This mis(conception) led India to firmly believe that it would quickly secure NSG membership—a milestone that would bring it close to breaching the P-5 structure. The nascent strategic coordination with the US was fantasized and exaggerated

(Lalwani & Byrne, 2019, p. 42) in the post-Indo-US nuclear deal. However, in reality, the bilateral relations were fragile (Grossman, 2024a, 2024b). It reflects India's limited experience in deep strategic coordination with the US. Recognizing India's shortcomings (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019, p. 41), US policymakers remained doubtful about New Delhi's defense decisions (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019, p. 41).

Second, a series of alleged secret plans and operations to kill people on foreign soils, including US land, was a serious concern for Washington (Office of Public Affairs | Justice Department Announces Charges Against Indian Government Employee in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate US Citizen in New York City | United States Department of Justice, 2024). The US government considered it a violation of its citizen rights (Office of Public Affairs | Justice Department Announces Charges Against Indian Government Employee in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate US Citizen in New York City | United States Department of Justice, 2024). Before that, Indian secret agencies targeted Canadian citizens. In response, the Canadian Prime Minister's Office released an official statement on the issue, describing the Indian act as violent and criminal (Statement by the Prime Minister on the Ongoing Investigation into Violent Criminal Activity Linked to the Government of India, 2024). Pakistan has been facing the same type of Indian offence and extraterritorial killing strategy (Ellis-Petersen et al., 2024). The continuation of such offensive crimes, as the Canadian government claimed (Statement by the Prime Minister on the Ongoing Investigation into Violent Criminal Activity Linked to the Government of India, 2024), has tarnished India's credibility as a responsible state. The two shots and two killings ignited World War I (WWI)(Saelee, n.d.). Thus, it would not be a simple extra-territorial killing act but a just reason for any instant political and military conflict between India and the targeted state. For Europe and the US, the lives of their citizens are a matter of grave concern. Simultaneously, in the case of Pakistan, where more than 20 such killings were reported by Indian secret agencies only in a short period of one year (Ellis-Petersen et al., 2024), a small act can fuel a war situation with the potential of nuclear escalation. Indian strategists were aware of these assessments and continued with intentionally aggressive state behavior.

Third, the US's increasing interest in mediating the Jammu & Kashmir problem was an unexpected move, demoted by India (Ballhaus, 2019)—a move that contradicted the connotation of Trump's proposal for the US to take a leading role in world politics and the UNSC. However, the Indian response increased distrust and created gaps between the states. Additionally, a sense of sensitivity to nuclear South Asia re-emerged in US policymakers in post-2019, and they realized that India's actions in Jammu & Kashmir will 're-hyphenation to Pakistan' (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019, p. 53). On the other hand, Indian policymakers misjudged the strength of US global primacy. However, considering Washington's balancing policy as the only choice left for the US in the region, New Delhi was misguided into building a parallel global narrative for a new power structure with India at the center. These (mis)calculations heightened India's tensions on its Western borders, prompting a return to more aggressive postures.

Fourth, Ukraine remained a sensitive issue, as it again divided the world into two camps: 'us vs. them.' New Delhi's stance was not satisfactory for European powers, as it abstained from

12 resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Tharoor, 2022). The emerging rifts among NATO countries during Trump's second term have created ambiguity in gauging the direction of future world politics. However, India is facing difficulties in drawing a clear line between the US and Russia regarding its strategic future (Tamkin, 2023). Despite posing a policy of neutrality on the issue, the oil purchase from Russia and indirect support to Moscow strengthened its finances to continue the war in Eastern Europe. Russian oil imports have remained a strong support for Russia's continued war in Ukraine (Peri, 2024). It is argued that if India reduces its oil imports from Russia, the war will immediately end (Peri, 2024). However, the Indian approach to dealing with the issues remained a grey area. India officially declared its ties with Russia stand on their merit' (QUESTION NO.3771 IMPACT OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR ON INDIA, n.d.).

Fifth, the nuclear security index is a crucial indicator that helps persuade major powers to support the membership of the NSG (The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) at a Glance | Arms Control Association, n.d.). The current challenges to nuclear security in India have become a hurdle. Due to the lack of required measures for higher standards, India has received a low score in the Nuclear Security Index (Noor, 2022). Several independence movements, including the Jammu & Kashmir problem (Joshi, 2015) and recent Indian secret operations in the US (Kaushik, Dayal, & Mukherjee, 2024) and Canada (Kaushik, Dayal, Mukherjee, et al., 2024) could sensitize the nuclear security of India of any threat from non-state actors. Moreover, the secret efforts to construct a nuclear city to maximize uranium enrichment could lead to India's defacto quest for Hydrogen bombs, which is an additional question not only in nuclear security concerns and anti-NPT stance (London, 2019) but also in amplification of NFU. Thus, India's route to enhanced nuclear deterrence lacks both policy and operational credibility.

The interplay of international factors defines and shapes a state's position on the political landscape. It refers to the distinct quality of a great power to perform actions or pursue an agenda with minimal effect on the structure, given its broader role within the same structure. Thus, it can influence other states, and there is a limited chance of being influenced by small powers or even competing powers except the challenger. A misperception of global self-imaging led to haste in India's rush to join the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India's failed bid to the NSG, along with strong opposition from China, Australia, Ireland, Turkey, the Netherlands, Brazil, and Switzerland (Thomas, 2016), led to a slump in the entire agenda. In practice, great powers engage in calculated bids (Taliaferro et al., 2009, p. 18), but India miscalculated. The structure, however, rarely determined top powers (Taliaferro et al., 2009, p. 2), and India was not among them.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

India has pursued an offensive foreign policy in its geopolitical and geostrategic positioning in the world. Over the last decade, India has faced serious strategic challenges, particularly during the Modi era. Two major variables shaped these emerging contours in India's offensive strategic postures. First, at the domestic level, the evolution of the Hindutva approach penetrated the national political structure after the BJP and Modi supported fundamentalism. It ultimately safronized institutions and political beliefs, damaging the traditional secular conception both domestically and internationally. On the other hand, the major powers pursued their interests

in the region through strategic traps. India misperceived the height of its relations with US, Russia, and China, that resulted in its failure to achieve its desire to join the major powers ring. The bid to NSG also failed. Consequently, a frustrated approach emerged in Indian strategic posturing. These offensive approaches demonstrate fundamentalism, primarily rooted in Hindutva ideolog.

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