

A Daoist Reappraisal of India–US Relations and India's Role in the Global South: Harmony, Paradox, and the Politics of Cooperation

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the evolving architecture of India–US relations between 2014 and 2026 alongside India's intensified claim to leadership of the Global South, asking whether these two roles constitute a coherent foreign policy or a latent contradiction. Departing from conventional accounts that treat cooperation and contradiction as mutually exclusive conditions, the study deploys a Daoist analytical lens—drawing on yin-yang dialectics, the principle of *wu wei* (non-forcing action), and the ideal of harmony without uniformity (*he er bu tong*)—to argue that India's dual posture is best understood as a politics of managed paradox rather than unresolved inconsistency. Employing a mixed-method design that combines content and discourse analysis of official documents and elite political texts with quantitative analysis of bilateral trade flows, defense cooperation indicators, and United Nations General Assembly voting data, the paper advances three arguments. First, the post-2014 transformation of the India–US partnership is structural rather than incremental, anchored in foundational defense agreements, the iCET and COMPACT technology frameworks, and bilateral trade exceeding USD 132 billion in FY 2024-25. Second, India's Global South leadership, exemplified by the Voice of the Global South Summits and the consensual New Delhi Declaration, has elevated its normative standing but remains under-institutionalized. Third, the frictions between the two roles, most acute in UN voting patterns and India's positions on the Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Hamas conflicts, function not as anomalies but as the yin-yang complementarities of a single strategy the paper reconceptualizes as *pragmatic balancing*: issue-based alignment, structural compartmentalization, and discursive bilingualism, now read as expressions of Daoist harmony in difference. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and reflects on the value of non-Western philosophical resources for theorizing the foreign policies of rising powers.

Keywords: *India–US relations, Global South, Daoism, Pragmatic Balancing, Relational Theory, Indian Foreign policy.*

1. Introduction

The international system of the third decade of the twenty-first century differs fundamentally from the post–Cold War unipolar moment. Power is diffused across a wider constellation of states, and the diplomatic vocabulary of the age turns on multipolarity, strategic autonomy, and the Global South. India occupies an unusually intricate position within this order. It has elevated its partnership with the United States to a depth unprecedented since independence; bilateral trade reached approximately USD 132.1 billion in FY 2024-25, with the United States retaining its position as India's largest trading partner (IBEF, 2025; Ministry of

Commerce and Industry, 2025). Simultaneously, India has projected itself as the principal voice of the developing world, hosting three editions of the Voice of the Global South Summit and presiding over a G20 that delivered the African Union's permanent membership (MEA, 2023a; G20 India Presidency, 2023).

Conventional analysis frames this dual posture as a puzzle demanding resolution: can India sustain a deepening partnership with Washington and credibly lead a Southern coalition whose grievances are often directed at Western-led institutions, or must it eventually choose? The present paper contends that the question itself is framed within a binary logic that Indian practice has quietly transcended. It therefore proposes a different analytical starting point, drawn from Daoist philosophy and its recent elaboration within international relations theory (Ling, 2014; Qin, 2018). In the Daoist worldview, apparently opposing forces—yin and yang—do not cancel one another; they are complementary polarities whose interaction generates order. Harmony (*he*, 和) is not the absence of difference but its productive coexistence, captured in the Confucian-Daoist ideal of *he er bu tong*: harmony without uniformity. Read through this lens, the "contradiction" between India's American partnership and its Southern leadership ceases to be a pathology awaiting correction. It becomes the constitutive tension of a deliberately paradoxical statecraft.

The empirical record gives this reframing substance. Four foundational defence agreements: LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), BECA (2020), and SOSA (2024) have created a degree of military interoperability previously reserved for treaty allies (Banerji, 2024). The iCET, launched in 2023, has been succeeded by the COMPACT framework announced during Prime Minister Modi's February 2025 visit to Washington, with an aspirational target of USD 500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030 (The White House, 2025). Yet in the same period, India abstained on successive UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia, expanded its imports of discounted Russian crude, and calibrated its position on the Israel– Hamas conflict in ways that tested Washington's patience while consolidating its Southern credibility. These episodes are not deviations from strategy. They are its operational grammar instances of what Daoist thought terms "*wu wei*," the disciplined restraint that acts by declining to force outcomes.

Four questions structure the inquiry. First, what are the principal structural changes in India–US relations after 2014, and what drives them? Second, what is the substantive content of India's Global South leadership in this period? Third, how should the relationship between these two roles be theorized—as a contradiction, as synergy, or as something the binary vocabulary cannot capture? Fourth, what does the Indian case contribute to the growing effort to theorize world politics through non-Western philosophical resources? The paper hypothesizes that India has crafted a strategy of *pragmatic balancing—issue-based* alignment, structural compartmentalization, and discursive bilingualism—whose inner logic is illuminated more fully than by realist or postcolonial theory alone by Daoist dialectics.

A note of methodological reflexivity is warranted at the outset. Daoism is a Chinese philosophical tradition, and its application to Indian foreign policy requires justification rather than assumption. The paper follows the Global IR agenda in treating civilisational concepts as portable analytical resources rather than proprietary cultural possessions (Acharya, 2014; Ling, 2014). It also notes the substantive resonance between Daoist relational holism and Indian civilizational idioms, most obviously *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family"), the motto of India's G20 presidency, which suggests that the conceptual travel is shorter than it may first appear. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 surveys the scholarship and constructs the theoretical framework, positioning Daoist dialectics as the meta-frame within which neorealist and postcolonial insights are integrated. Section 3 specifies the mixed-method design. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis and re-reads the findings through the categories of yin-yang complementarity, *wu wei*, and harmony-in-difference. Section 5 concludes with the principal findings and policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Four Streams of Scholarship

The scholarship relevant to this inquiry flows in four productive but largely parallel streams. The first concerns the structural trajectory of India–US relations. C. Raja Mohan has long argued that Indian foreign-policy

discourse remains trapped in abstract debates about strategic autonomy, when what is required is a sober calibration of national interests that treats partnerships as instruments rather than departures from principle (Mohan, 2019). Ashley Tellis frames the deepening partnership as a structural response to the rise of China, contending that even as India embraces 'multi-alignment'—a term Jaishankar himself has actively deployed and defended in public discourse (India Writes, 2024)—the United States remains a pivotal buttress for Indian power (Tellis, 2021). Anuttama Banerji's recent assessment characterizes the foundational agreements as catalysts that have substantially deepened bilateral defence ties, particularly in the maritime domain (Banerji, 2024).

The second stream addresses the Global South as an analytical and political category. Vijay Prashad has argued influentially that the Global South denotes not a geographic region but a concatenation of protests against neoliberal globalisation, a framing that complicates the leadership claims of states such as India that simultaneously seek deeper integration with the institutions of the global North (Prashad, 2012). More recent work situates India's G20 presidency as the high point of a deliberate effort to reorient the multilateral agenda toward Southern priorities, while cautioning that the gains remain personality-driven and institutionally shallow (Pant & Joshi, 2023).

A third body of scholarship examines what Ian Hall has termed the "Jaishankar doctrine" the philosophy of foreign policy articulated by India's External Affairs Minister. Hall demonstrates that Jaishankar's published writings, particularly *The India Way* (2020) and *Why Bharat Matters* (2024), constitute a coherent attempt to reconcile realist statecraft with civilizational nationalism, producing a worldview in which 'there will be convergence with many but congruence with none' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 41; Hall, 2025). Jaishankar has publicly elaborated this doctrine in subsequent interviews and lectures, notably framing it as *multi-alignment*—an operational philosophy oriented toward maximising India's simultaneous engagements across otherwise divergent partnerships (India Writes, 2024).

The fourth stream and the one from which this paper draws its distinctive analytical lens is the emerging literature that brings Daoist and relational philosophy into international relations theory. L. H. M. Ling's *The Dao of World Politics* (2014) proposed a "worldist" IR grounded in yin-yang dialectics, in which world politics is understood not as the collision of self-contained units but as the continuous interaction of mutually constitutive polarities. Qin Yaqing's relational theory develops this insight systematically: actors are constituted by their relationships, rationality is embedded in relational contexts, and the governing logic of interaction is the *zhongyong* dialectic—a "both-and" logic of complementary opposites rather than the "either-or" logic of Western dualism (Qin, 2016, 2018). Within this tradition, harmony (*he*) is expressly distinguished from sameness: the classical ideal of *he er bu tong*, harmony without uniformity, envisages order as the productive coexistence of differences rather than their elimination. A related but distinct strand, Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") theory, proposes a world-ordering framework of inclusive coexistence, though its hierarchical undertones have attracted sustained criticism (Zhao, 2019). These works belong to the broader Global IR agenda, which insists that concepts drawn from non-Western civilisations are portable analytical resources for theorising world politics generally, not cultural artefacts confined to their regions of origin (Acharya, 2014).

The integration of these four streams is virtually non-existent. Studies of India-US relations rarely engage the Global South dimension; analyses of India's Southern leadership treat the Western partnership as an external constraint; and the Daoist-relational literature has been applied overwhelmingly to China, almost never to India. The present paper occupies this triple gap: it reads India's two trajectories together, and it does so through a philosophical lens that has not previously been brought to bear on the Indian case.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Daoist Dialectics as Meta-Frame

The framework proceeds in three layers. The first layer is neorealist. In the Waltzian formulation, states operating under anarchy pursue security through the management of the balance of power (Waltz, 1979). The structural rise of China has destabilized the Indo-Pacific balance, and the deepening India-US partnership is intelligible as a response to that systemic pressure. The second layer is postcolonial. Drawing on Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) and elaborated within IR by Acharya (2014), this tradition reads the Global South as a

political identity rooted in shared experiences of colonialism, structural inequality, and exclusion from global governance. India's Voice of the Global South Summits and its advocacy of "common but differentiated responsibilities" are intelligible only within this normative frame.

Each lens explains one half of India's posture; neither explains their coexistence. Neorealism predicts that alignment pressures should eventually force a choice; postcolonial theory struggles to accommodate India's enthusiastic embrace of the American partnership. It is precisely at this junction that the third, Daoist layer performs its analytical work. Three concepts are operationalized. **Yin-yang complementarity** reframes cooperation and contradiction as mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive: India's Western engagement and Southern solidarity are treated as polarities whose tension generates, rather than undermines, strategic coherence (Ling, 2014). **Wu wei**, often translated as non-forcing or effortless action supplies a vocabulary for strategic restraint as a positive mode of agency: abstention, calibrated silence, and the refusal to choose are read as actions, not absences (Ames & Hall, 2003). **Harmony without uniformity** (*he er bu tong*) provides the normative criterion by which the strategy's success is assessed: not the elimination of the difference between India's two roles, but their sustainable coexistence (Qin, 2018).

Two caveats discipline the framework. First, applying a Chinese philosophical tradition to Indian statecraft is an analytical choice, not a claim about the intellectual sources of Indian policy; the justification lies in the Global IR premise of conceptual portability and in the substantive resonance between Daoist relational holism and Indian idioms such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. Second, the Daoist lens is deployed as an interpretive meta-frame that organises neorealist and postcolonial insights; it does not replace them. The empirical analysis in Section 4 therefore retains its materialist and normative registers, while the synthesis in Section 4.4 performs the Daoist re-reading.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method design that integrates qualitative and quantitative analysis along the lines of the convergent parallel approach articulated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). The choice of method is dictated by the nature of the research question. Assessing whether two roles operating in different domains—elite strategic partnership and normative Southern leadership—coexist harmoniously or contradictorily requires both close interpretation of foreign-policy texts and systematic measurement of behavioural indicators. The Daoist lens adds a third, interpretive-philosophical requirement: the analytical categories through which the evidence is read (complementarity, non-forcing action, harmony-in-difference) must themselves be specified with precision, so that the philosophical vocabulary functions as an instrument of analysis rather than a decorative flourish.

The qualitative component proceeds along two axes. The first is content analysis of primary documents, including the joint statements issued during the prime ministerial visits to Washington in 2023 and 2025, the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration of the G20 (2023), the Chair's Summaries of the three Voice of the Global South Summits, official press releases of the Ministry of External Affairs, and corresponding statements from the United States Department of State. The second axis is discourse analysis of elite political texts, focusing on Jaishankar's *The India Way* (2020) and *Why Bharat Matters* (2024), Modi's keynote addresses at the Voice of the Global South Summits, and the analytical commentary of C. Raja Mohan. In coding these texts, particular attention is paid to markers of what Section 4.4 terms discursive bilingualism: systematic variation in normative vocabulary across audiences since such variation constitutes the observable trace of harmony-in-difference at the level of language.

The quantitative component draws on three datasets. Bilateral trade data are sourced from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of India and the United States Trade Representative for the period 2014-15 to 2024-25 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2025; USTR, 2025). Defence cooperation data, covering both the chronology of agreements and the value of arms transfers, are drawn from the U.S. Department of State and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025). UN General Assembly voting data come from the Department of State's annual *Voting Practices in the United Nations* reports for 2022, 2023, and 2024 (U.S. Department of State, 2024, 2025).

The temporal scope is defined by two markers. The lower bound, 2014, marks the beginning of the present government's tenure and the inflection point at which the post-2005 trajectory of India–US relations acquired qualitatively new depth. The upper bound, 2026, captures the most recent developments, including the 2025 Modi–Trump joint statement and the second Trump administration's evolving tariff posture toward India.

Four limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and publicly available documents; interviews with policymakers lie beyond the scope of a single article. Second, the Global South is treated as a useful but heterogeneous analytical category whose internal diversity cannot be fully disaggregated here. Third, the rapidly evolving trade dynamics under the second Trump administration may render some empirical specifics provisional, although the analytical framework should retain explanatory traction. Fourth and specific to this paper's design, the application of Daoist categories to Indian statecraft is an interpretive choice by the analyst, not a claim about the conscious philosophical sources of Indian policy; the risk of conceptual overstretch is mitigated by anchoring each Daoist category to observable behavioral indicators (abstention patterns, compartmentalized issue-linkages, and audience-differentiated discourse).

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Structural Transformation of India–US Relations, 2014–2026: The Yang of Convergence

The change in India–US relations since 2014 is not a matter of incremental deepening; it is a qualitative reordering of the partnership across three reinforcing domains—defence, trade, and technology. In the vocabulary of this paper, these domains constitute the *yang* of Indian strategy: the visible, assertive, outward-facing pole of engagement with American power. The defence transformation rests on a sequence of agreements that have progressively dismantled the institutional barriers to military interoperability. LEMOA (2016) provided a framework for reciprocal logistical support, granting Indian forces access to U.S. facilities in Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Guam, and Subic Bay (Banerji, 2024). COMCASA (2018) enabled the transfer of encrypted communication systems, while BECA (2020) opened pathways for the sharing of geospatial intelligence and high-resolution satellite data. SOSA, signed in 2024, secured priority access to U.S. defence supply chains.

Yet even at the heart of this convergence, the counter-pole is preserved. India has been careful to deploy the language of "partnership" rather than "alliance," maintaining the discursive space within which strategic autonomy can be claimed. The refusal of the alliance label is not diplomatic timidity; it is an early instance of the non-forcing discipline, *wu wei*, that structures the entire posture. **Table-1** summarizes the institutional architecture.

Table 1: Major India-US Defence Agreements and Initiatives, 2016-2025

Year	Agreement / Initiative			Substantive Content	Strategic Significance
2016	LEMOA			Reciprocal logistical support	Access to U.S. military facilities
2016	Major status	Defence Partner		Strategic designation	Treatment comparable to treaty allies
2018	COMCASA			Secure military communications	Transfer of advanced systems
2018	STA-1 status			Strategic Trade Authorisation	Eased high-technology transfers

Year	Agreement / Initiative	Substantive Content	Strategic Significance
2020	BECA	Geospatial intelligence sharing	Access to satellite data and maps
2023	iCET	Critical and emerging technologies	AI, semiconductors, quantum computing
2024	SOSA	Supply chain security	Priority access to defence inputs
2024	MQ-9B drone deal	Defence procurement (USD 4 bn)	Enhanced ISR capability
2025	COMPACT	Military, commerce, and technology	Ten-year strategic framework

Sources: MEA; U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

The trade dimension exhibits comparable expansion. Bilateral trade roughly doubled in a decade, with the United States consistently India's largest trading partner. Table 2 traces this evolution. The structural feature most consequential for the politics of the relationship is India's persistent and growing trade surplus, which reached approximately USD 41 billion in FY 2024-25 (IBEF, 2025). This surplus has become the principal flashpoint in bilateral trade diplomacy under the second Trump administration, which imposed reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods in 2025 and periodically escalated penalty tariffs in connection with India's Russian oil imports (USTR, 2025). The aspirational target of USD 500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030, announced in the February 2025 joint statement, signals shared political commitment even as specific commercial frictions intensify (The White House, 2025). Friction and commitment advancing together: the pattern is already, in miniature, the paradox the paper theorizes.

Figure-1: Chronological Timeline of Major India–US Defence Agreements and Initiatives, 2016–2025

Note. The figure depicts the cumulative institutional layering of foundational agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA), technology frameworks (iCET, COMPACT), and supply-chain arrangements (SOSA), showing that each agreement, once concluded, continues to structure bilateral cooperation through 2025. Source: Compiled by the authors from MEA, U.S. Department of State, and The White House (2025).

 INDIA–U.S. MAJOR DEFENCE AGREEMENTS & INITIATIVES  Strengthening Strategic Partnership and Defence Cooperation			
YEAR	AGREEMENT / INITIATIVE	SUBSTANTIVE CONTENT	STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE
2016	 LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement)	Reciprocal logistical support 	Access to U.S. military facilities for logistics support, refueling, repair and supplies 
2016	 Major Defence Partner Status (Strategic Designation)	Strategic designation recognizing India as a Major Defence Partner 	Treatment comparable to U.S. treaty allies in defence trade and cooperation 
2018	 COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement)	Facilitates secure military communications and interoperability 	Transfer of advanced communication equipment and encryption technologies 
2018	 STA-1 Status (Strategic Trade Authorisation – 1)	India granted STA-1 for export control and strategic trade 	Eased high-technology transfers and export license requirements 
2020	 BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement)	Enables sharing of geospatial intelligence and data 	Access to U.S. satellite data, maps and nautical charts for precision operations 
2023	 iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies)	Cooperation in critical and emerging technologies 	Focus areas: AI, semiconductors, quantum computing, advanced telecom, biotech, and more 
2024	 SOSA (Supply Chain Security Agreement)	Strengthening defence supply chains and industrial cooperation 	Priority access to defence industrial inputs and resilient supply chains 
2024	 MQ-9B Drone Deal (Defence Procurement)	Procurement of MQ-9B Armed Drones from U.S. 	USD 4 billion deal enhancing India's ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) capability 
2025	 COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology)	Comprehensive 10-year framework covering military, commerce and technology cooperation 	A long-term strategic framework for deepened cooperation and shared prosperity 
★ A Robust and Evolving India–U.S. Defence Partnership for a Secure and Prosperous Indo-Pacific ★			

From figure-1, it is also obvious that between 2016 and 2025, the India–U.S. strategic partnership steadily strengthened through defence agreements, technological cooperation, intelligence sharing, supply chain security, and long-term military collaboration. This significantly enhanced military interoperability, access to advanced technologies, and strategic security in the Indo-Pacific region.

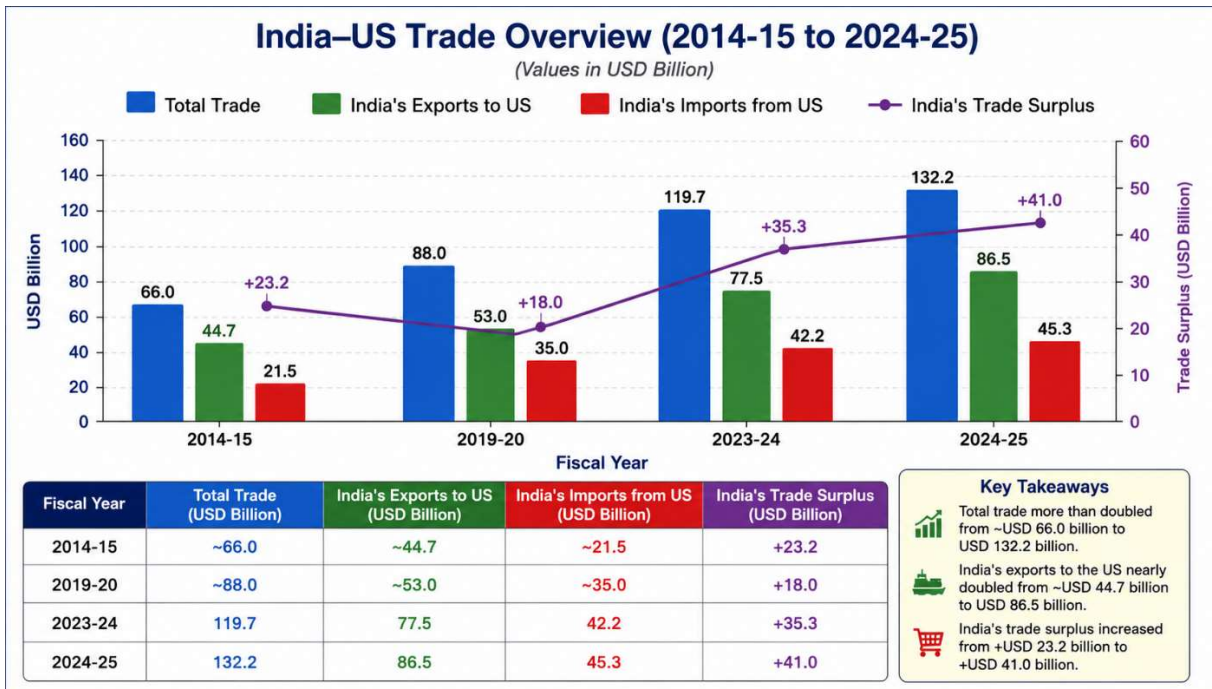
Table 2: India-US Bilateral Trade, 2014-15 to 2024-25 (USD billion)

Fiscal Year	Total Trade	India's Exports to US	India's Imports from US	India's Trade Surplus
2014-15	~66.0	~44.7	~21.5	+23.2
2019-20	~88.0	~53.0	~35.0	+18.0
2023-24	119.7	77.5	42.2	+35.3
2024-25	132.2	86.5	45.3	+41.0

Sources: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India; IBEF (2025); USTR (2025). Figures for 2014-15 and 2019-20 are approximate.

The technology pillar is, in many respects, the most consequential for the medium-term trajectory of the partnership. iCET, formally launched in January 2023, established cooperation pathways across artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, and space. COMPACT, unveiled in February 2025, situates these initiatives within a comprehensive ten-year framework spanning military cooperation, commercial integration, and technology transfer (The White House, 2025). The convergence is not coincidental: each domain is tightly coupled to the broader U.S.–China technology competition, which supplies the systemic neorealist logic animating this pole of the strategy. And the same is explained in **figure-2** clearly as well.

Figure-2: India-US Trade Overview



4.2 India's Leadership of the Global South: The Yin of Solidarity

If India–US convergence has been the most visible feature of Indian foreign policy after 2014, the claim to Global South leadership has been the most consciously cultivated. It constitutes the *yin* of the strategy: the receptive, solidaristic, normatively grounded pole oriented toward the developing world. The year 2023 was decisive. In January, India hosted the first Voice of the Global South Summit, bringing together 125 developing countries in a virtual format. Modi's framing was unambiguous: "Your voice is India's voice. Your priorities are India's priorities" (Modi, 2023). Five concrete initiatives were announced—the Global South Centre of Excellence (DAKSHIN), the Global South Young Diplomats Forum, Global South Scholarships, the Aarogya Maitri health-cooperation programme, and a science and technology platform (MEA, 2023a).

The G20 presidency that followed represented the high-water mark of this strategy. Three accomplishments stand out. The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, comprising 83 paragraphs, was adopted by consensus despite the deep cleavage over Russia's war in Ukraine—a diplomatic feat several commentators considered improbable in advance (G20 India Presidency, 2023). The African Union was admitted as a permanent member of the G20, a substantial reorientation of the grouping's representational architecture. And the declaration registered explicit recognition that climate finance must scale 'from billions to trillions' (G20 India Presidency, 2023, para. 41), codifying a long-standing demand of the developing world. Table 3 summarises the principal initiatives.

Table 3: India's Major Global South Initiatives, 2023-2024

Initiative	Year	Participating States	Objective	Current Status
Voice of Global South Summit (1st)	January 2023	125	Aggregating developing-country priorities	Inputs incorporated into G20 agenda
DAKSHIN (Centre of Excellence)	2023	Multilateral	Knowledge platform for the Global South	Initial phase
Global South Young Diplomats Forum	2023	Multilateral	Networking among emerging diplomats	Announced; implementation pending
Aarogya Maitri	2023	Multilateral	Medical assistance during disasters	Operational
G20 Presidency	September 2023	G20 plus 9 invitees	Mainstreaming Southern concerns	Concluded; transferred to Brazil
African Union G20 membership	September 2023	55 (AU members)	African representation in G20	Permanent membership secured
Voice of Global South Summit (3rd)	August 2024	123	Follow-up to G20 outcomes	Concluded

Sources: MEA (2023a, 2023b, 2024); G20 India Presidency (2023).

Two qualifications must temper an unduly celebratory reading. The first concerns institutionalisation. Most of these initiatives remain summit-driven, dependent on episodic political mobilisation rather than embedded organisational structures. There is, as yet, no permanent secretariat for the Voice of the Global South process, no binding declaration with follow-up mechanisms, and no clear institutional pathway through which Southern priorities are translated into multilateral outcomes (Pant & Joshi, 2023). The second concerns heterogeneity. The Global South is not a monolith. African priorities differ from those of the Pacific Island states; Latin American economic concerns diverge from South Asian security preoccupations. Prashad's critique—that emerging powers may use the rhetoric of Southern solidarity while pursuing their own integration into the institutions of the global North—remains analytically pertinent (Prashad, 2012). In Daoist terms, a yin pole that lacks institutional embodiment risks becoming rhetorical rather than relational.

4.3 The Politics of the Dual Role: Paradox as Practice

The central question of the paper is whether the two roles described above operate in tension, in synergy, or in some configuration that the binary vocabulary cannot capture. The evidence suggests a pattern of differentiated outcomes, in which the level of friction varies sharply across issue areas. Three test cases illustrate the dynamic; each, on close inspection, exhibits the structure of managed paradox rather than unresolved contradiction.

The Russia-Ukraine war (2022 onwards). This crisis represented the most stringent test of India's dual posture. While the United States and its European partners pressed for the diplomatic isolation of Moscow, India abstained on successive UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia, including the March 2023 vote in which 141 states supported the resolution while India joined China, South Africa, Iran, and others in abstention (UN Digital Library, 2024). India simultaneously expanded its imports of discounted Russian crude, which it processed and re-exported, including to European buyers. The stance generated sustained criticism in Washington but consolidated India's standing across much of the Global South, where the war has largely been read as a European problem in which neutrality is legitimate. Jaishankar's characteristic response—"if I'm smart enough to have multiple options, you should be admiring me—you shouldn't be criticising me"—captured the political confidence with which the posture was defended (Jaishankar, cited in *Foreign Policy*, 2024). Read through the Daoist lens, abstention here is not the absence of policy but its exercise: a textbook instance of *wu wei*, in which declining to force a choice preserves relational capital on both sides of a divided system.

UN voting patterns. The State Department's annual voting-coincidence reports provide systematic evidence of the gap between bilateral convergence and multilateral divergence. The average voting coincidence of all UN member states with the United States stood at 46 percent in 2024 (U.S. Department of State, 2025). India's coincidence with U.S. positions in the General Assembly has historically remained well below this average—typically in the 25-35 percent range—reflecting persistent disagreement on Israel-Palestine, disarmament, and the rights of developing countries. This is the most quantifiable expression of the paper's argument: extraordinarily deep bilateral cooperation coexists, year after year, with sustained multilateral divergence. A dualist logic would treat this coexistence as instability awaiting correction. A yin-yang logic treats it as the equilibrium itself.

The G20 paradox. India's G20 presidency embodies the dual role in a single institution. The G20 is, in origin and composition, a Northern-dominated body—its membership accounts for roughly 85 percent of global GDP and 75 percent of world trade. India used this Northern platform to advance Southern priorities, securing the African Union's membership and codifying Southern demands on climate finance. This was harmony-in-difference enacted institutionally: difference was not dissolved but orchestrated. It also raises the deeper question, held open rather than resolved here, of whether Southern interests can be substantively advanced through institutions whose foundational architecture privileges the global North.

Table 4. India's Dual Role: A Comparative Analysis Across Domains

Dimension	As US Strategic Partner	As Global South Leader	Tension Level
Defence cooperation	Quad, LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA, COMPACT	Limited South-South defence cooperation	Low
Trade policy	FTA negotiations; USD 500 bn target	WTO advocacy for developing countries	Moderate
UN voting	Coincidence ~25-35%	High alignment with Global South	High
Russia-Ukraine war	Western expectation of condemnation	Strategic abstention; continued Russian oil imports	High
Israel-Hamas	US support for Israel	Southern support for Palestine	Very High

Dimension	As US Strategic Partner		As Global South Leader		Tension Level
Climate finance	Limited liability	developed-country	“Billions to trillions” demand		Moderate-High
Technology	iCET, COMPACT—US-centric		DPI sharing, internationalisation	UPI	Low
Multilateral institutions	Quad, I2U2—Western-leaning		BRICS, SCO—non-Western		Moderate

Source: Compiled by the author based on multiple primary and secondary sources; theoretical categorization follows the *wu wei / he er bu tong* framework elaborated in Section 4.3.

Table 4 makes visible what a single narrative cannot. The tension is not uniform across the foreign-policy spectrum; it is highly issue-specific. In defence and emerging technologies, the two roles operate with minimal friction because the Global South does not possess strong opposing preferences in these domains. In trade policy, there is moderate tension as India simultaneously negotiates with Washington and advocates for developing-country interests in the WTO. The most acute tensions arise where the Global South holds strong, articulated preferences that diverge from U.S. positions—UN voting on Palestine, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas crisis. The gradient of tension in the table's final column can thus be read as a map of where the yin-yang polarity is easily balanced and where it approaches the limits of harmony.

4.4 Pragmatic Balancing as Daoist Statecraft

Synthesising the empirical findings, the paper proposes that India's contemporary foreign policy is best understood as *Pragmatic Balancing*—a strategy whose three constitutive features correspond, with striking fidelity, to the three Daoist categories specified in Section 2.2.

The first feature is **issue-based alignment**, the behavioural expression of yin-yang complementarity. India does not seek comprehensive alignment with any single power or bloc; it determines its position issue by issue. Defence and technology cooperation with the United States, energy cooperation with Russia, multilateral solidarity with the Global South—these are not contradictory commitments but complementary polarities, each calibrated to specific interests and each deriving meaning from the existence of the other. Jaishankar's formulation—‘there will be convergence with many but congruence with none’ (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 41), which he has since consolidated under the rubric of *multi-alignment* (India Writes, 2024)—is, in effect, an indigenous restatement of *he er bu tong*.

The second feature is **structural compartmentalisation**, the institutional expression of *wu wei*. India has cultivated a distinctive capacity to insulate one set of relationships from disturbances in another. Trade frictions with the United States—including the 2025 tariff escalations—have not derailed defence cooperation; the announcement of COMPACT proceeded even as tariff disputes intensified. UN voting divergences have not impeded summit-level diplomacy. This discipline of not forcing linkages, of allowing each relationship to follow its own course without contaminating the others, is non-forcing action rendered as bureaucratic practice.

The third feature is **discursive bilingualism**, the linguistic expression of harmony-in-difference. In Washington and other Western capitals, India speaks the language of shared democratic values, the rules-based order, and a free and open Indo-Pacific. In Global South settings, the vocabulary shifts to *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, South-South cooperation, inclusive multilateralism, and “common but differentiated responsibilities.” Both vocabularies reflect genuine elements of India's posture; what differs is emphasis, framing, and audience.

design. Harmony here is achieved not by imposing a single narrative on all audiences but by allowing distinct registers to coexist *he* without *tong*.

The framework has clear limits, and the Daoist lens sharpens rather than conceals them. Yin-yang balance is dynamic, not static; classical Daoist thought insists that polarities held in tension require continuous adjustment, and that forcing either pole to dominate destroys the whole. The strategy accordingly depends on the continuing willingness of both Washington and the Global South to tolerate India's dual positioning. Were either constituency to demand explicit alignment—as Cold War politics frequently did—the architecture would face severe strain. The Israel-Hamas crisis has already exposed this vulnerability: India's calibrated stance has neither fully satisfied Washington nor met the expectations of Southern publics, particularly in Muslim-majority states. Furthermore, the strategy currently relies heavily on a particular leadership style; whether harmony-in-difference can be institutionally embedded, and thus survive leadership transitions, remains an open question to which the conclusion returns.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Major Findings

This study has examined India's contemporary foreign policy through the lens of two simultaneously expanding roles—strategic partner of the United States and leader of the Global South and has read their interaction through Daoist categories of complementarity, non-forcing action, and harmony without uniformity. Four major findings emerge.

First, the post-2014 transformation of India–US relations is qualitative rather than incremental. The combination of foundational defence agreements, the iCET and COMPACT technology frameworks, and bilateral trade exceeding USD 132 billion has carried the partnership to the threshold of a comprehensive global strategic partnership (The White House, 2025). The structural drivers are clear: the rise of China, the destabilization of the Indo-Pacific balance, and the reorganization of global technology supply chains.

Second, India's articulation of Global South leadership reached its high point in 2023 with the Voice of the Global South Summit, the consensual New Delhi Declaration, and the African Union's accession to the G20. This leadership remains, however, predominantly leader-driven and event-based; the institutional architecture necessary to render it durable has not yet been built.

Third—the paper's central theoretical contribution—the tension between the two roles is real but is misdescribed by the binary vocabulary of contradiction—frictions concentrate in specific domains (UN voting, the Russia–Ukraine war, and the Israel–Hamas crisis) while convergence dominates defence and technology. Read through yin-yang dialectics, this issue-specific gradient is not instability awaiting resolution; it is the operating equilibrium of a strategy of managed paradox. *Pragmatic balancing*—issue-based alignment, structural compartmentalization, and discursive bilingualism—**is** thereby revealed as a practice of *he er bu tong*: harmony sustained through, not despite, difference. The Indian case also demonstrates the analytical portability of Daoist concepts beyond the Chinese context for which they have chiefly been theorized (Ling, 2014; Qin, 2018).

Fourth, the central hypothesis is partially supported. India has coordinated its dual role through pragmatic balancing, but Daoist theory itself predicts the fragility of the arrangement: polarities held in tension require continuous rebalancing, and a crisis that forces one pole to dominate would destroy the whole. The secondary hypothesis that the G20 presidency consolidated India's Global South leadership without institutionalizing it is fully supported.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

Three recommendations follow. **First**, the institutionalization of Global South leadership requires urgent attention. The Voice of the Global South Summit should be equipped with a permanent secretariat, an annual

calendar, and a concrete action plan; DAKSHIN should be developed into a functioning research institution. In the paper's terms, the yin pole of the strategy must acquire organisational embodiment if it is to balance the heavily institutionalised yang pole of the American partnership.

Second, the trade imbalance with the United States—USD 41 billion in FY 2024-25—is a sustained source of friction. Constructive management requires expanding U.S. imports in energy, defence equipment, and high-technology sectors, in line with the USD 500 billion target announced in February 2025. This would address Trump-administration concerns while creating complementary economic interests that buttress the partnership.

Third, India should cultivate a discourse capable of holding both registers within a single frame. The discursive bilingualism that has served pragmatic balancing may, over time, generate credibility costs as audiences become aware of the divergent vocabularies. The concept of *inclusive multipolarity*—or, in the idiom this paper has developed, an explicit diplomacy of harmony-in-difference anchored in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—may offer a unifying narrative that accommodates Western partnership and Southern leadership without concealing either.

5.3 Future Research Directions and Concluding Remarks

Several questions remain. How do Global South states themselves—particularly in Africa and Latin America—perceive India's leadership claims? Primary research in those regions would enrich the literature. The medium-term impact of the second Trump administration's transactional style warrants sustained attention. The comparative analysis of India's and China's competing claims to Southern leadership now readable as competing applications of relational statecraft represents a rich agenda, as does the further development of Daoist and other non-Western frameworks for the study of rising powers beyond China (Acharya, 2014; Qin, 2016).

The paper closes with a substantive proposition. India's foreign policy has moved decisively beyond the Cold War posture of non-alignment, settling into a paradigm that is neither passive neutrality nor rigid alignment but an active, issue-specific statecraft of balanced polarities. Like the Daoist sage who acts by not forcing, India has declined the choice its partners periodically demand of it and has made that refusal the source of its leverage. The strategy is not self-sustaining; harmony, in the Daoist understanding, is never a possession but a continuous practice. The diplomatic skill with which India sustains this practice will determine not only its own standing but also the prospects of the developing states that increasingly look to it for representation.

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